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Translated by *Tracy Kuehn*
Designed by *Timur Samigulin*

Ш. Рашидов

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I

Ivan Ivanovich woke up early, when it was just beginning to get light. He washed, dressed unhurriedly, and picked up a bucket to go to the well for water. Once outside he stopped, struck by the fresh scent of fields and meadows. The green grass, the tall, stately birch and the high blue sky pleased the eye, and the morning mist still hanging over the village promised a good day.

Berezovka*, his native village, was fairly large by Russian standards, with three hundred families, a rather new school building, and homes of different shapes and sizes, with tin, tile and many thatched roofs.

It may not have been a particularly beautiful village, but Ivan Ivanovich loved it. For him, there was no place better. The life of the village was a part of the elderly teacher's life: there were former, present and future students of his in every house, and each was a part of him.

A feeling of deep, immeasurable gratitude to his native land, his people and the fields, forests and streams around Berezovka enveloped him, and he straightened his shoulders and took a deep breath. The morning air was still cool, but the summer heat would soon change that. There were marshes around the village and the hot air quickly filled with suffocating humidity. The Dry River had shrunk long ago, which was probably why it had such an incongruous name. Only the Quiet River continued to flow calmly past Berezovka, winding around steep slopes and through the deep ravine.

The old teacher left his pail on the ground and walked down to the river, covered with duckweed near its banks. The Quiet was wide and deep in places, but in that particular spot near the village it could be forded without danger.

On the opposite bank a dense, dark forest began at the river's edge and continued for dozens of kilometers.

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*From *bereza* which means birch.

No matter how many times Ivan Ivanovich had looked at that river during his long life, he always found something new in it. It seemed to be filled with mysterious, unfathomable magic.

Then his gaze fell on a birch growing on the opposite bank, an old tree battered by time, strong winds, rain and winter frosts. His heart suddenly filled with anxiety and seemed to wake from a deep sleep—the country had been at war for two months.

For the past eight weeks there had been fierce fighting along an enormous front, which was now close, almost in the very center of Russia.

Despite great losses, the Soviet Army had managed to halt the German Army's advance near Smolensk and Elnia, and the enemy Group Center was now on the defensive. The Nazi command had now shifted its attention from the central part of the front to the flanks.

The situation was tense.

The week before, Berezovka experienced its first German air raid. Three houses were destroyed, the Esins' among them. Anna Esin, the daughter-in-law of Ivan Ivanovich's best friend, Mikhail, or Grandpa Misha, as everyone in the village called him, was killed. Luckily the children, Sergei and Irina, were not home.

Ivan Ivanovich looked at the sky anxiously, returned to get his bucket, and went to the well. The gentle, peaceful, cloudless sky only increased his uneasiness.

"Will the Germans really come here?" the old teacher wondered. "If so, it means all that took centuries to create will be trampled and destroyed. What will happen to us? And what about the school and my students? The new school year begins in three weeks."

Suddenly he heard an already familiar and terrifying sound. It was not thunder or an earthquake, but the ever increasing hum of planes.

They were coming from the west in several rows. Windows shuttered lightly, and people hurried into the street.

"Junkers," Ivan Ivanovich thought, glancing up. The enemy bombers were flying at a fairly high altitude and soon disappeared in the morning mist.

For some time already the newspapers and radio had been carrying reports of Nazi brutality, and Ivan Ivanovich imagined what was about to happen in those places where the German pilots were to drop their bombs—fires, blood, and death.

The teacher had not yet reached home when he again heard a rumble, this time clearer and sharper. The German planes were returning, flying lower than before and followed by Soviet fighters.

Suddenly there was a piercing shriek and terrifying, deafening explosions rocked Berezovka.

There was one explosion after another as the thwarted enemy planes dropped their remaining bombs. Logs of a small, old bridge built across a wide brook many, many years before, flew in the air. The second and third bombs exploded in the center of the village and one of them fell in Ivan Ivanovich's yard. The fence and log house blew apart like they were toys. A fragment hit the teacher in the shoulder and he felt a searing pain. Before he had time to collect himself, he was flung aside by a blast. As he lost consciousness, he saw the remains of his house burst into flames.

"Thank goodness I'm alone and there was no one in the house," he thought, and then everything went black.

The planes disappeared to the west. An enormous, black cloud of smoke hung above Berezovka.

Heart-rending cries, screams and sobbing could be heard throughout the village, along with the mooing of frightened cows and the barking of dogs. Someone was striking a piece of metal, calling the villagers to come fight the fires.

People hurried to Ivan Ivanovich's house.

"Where is Ivan Ivanovich?" they asked one another. "Was he in the house?"

The teacher regained consciousness. Voices seemed to be coming from far away and he could barely hear them. Then he clearly heard the voices of a man and two children calling him. He recognized the man's deep bass as that of the blacksmith, Grandpa Misha, but he still could not recognize the children. Only when he heard Grandpa Misha scold someone for crying, did he realize that the voices were Irina's and Sergei's.

White spots swam before his eyes and he again lost consciousness. People ran over to him. His shoulder was covered with blood.

Grandpa Misha lifted him carefully and carried him to his house. Sergei and Irina helped. The others in the village — women, children and old people—gathered around the burned house, sadly discussing what had happened.

Near the blacksmith's house Ivan Ivanovich opened his eyes.

"I'm heavy for you."

"Be quiet," Grandpa Misha said. "Don't talk. Everything will be fine."

"You're right. It's not the first time," Ivan Ivanovich whispered.

He was first wounded in 19.., during the First World War. Then the Civil War began. Initially he fought on the Orenburg Front, and later against Basmatchi counter-revolutionary bands in Central Asia.

His cavalry regiment and units of Budyonny's army fought the bands in the Baisun Mountains, the Shirabad Steppe and near

Babatag. The young commander was wounded three times, but had never left the battlefield fighting to defend the new Soviet republic.

After the Civil War, Ivan Ivanovich returned to Berezovka. Then he went to college to become a teacher.

First he taught in a shed, hastily converted into a school. In the early 1930s, the school was transferred to the two-storey house of a dispossessed wealthy farm family. Two years before the war, a new building had been opened, built according to a local architect's plans with spacious classrooms and large windows. Ivan Ivanovich was the school principal and taught Russian, literature and history.

Now it was war again. The Nazis had attacked the country without warning, and were spreading through cities and towns like the plague. It was the duty of every Soviet citizen to defend his country, to answer the call of his heart.

Ivan Ivanovich could not sit doing nothing.

The week before, Communist Party members had gathered in Durasovo at the Regional Party Committee offices. They had talked about the approaching front, about evacuating livestock and equipment, and about who should remain under possible Nazi occupation. None of the activists was preparing to be evacuated to the east.

"I don't know about anyone else, but I'm joining the partisans," Ivan Ivanovich had said. "I have experience in fighting, as do a lot of us here. We don't need to be thinking of evacuation, but about where to set up partisan camps, how to store provisions and equipment in the forest, where to get weapons..."

Everyone agreed with him

For three days and nights Grandpa Misha changed Ivan Ivanovich's dressing every few hours. The teacher had lost a lot of blood, and was in a stupor for hours on end. Sergei and Irina did not leave his bedside.

"Misha, someone should go to the Party Committee in Durasovo," Ivan Ivanovich said in one of his lucid moments.

"I'll go," Grandpa Misha promised.

"Maybe we could go?" Irina offered.

"We'll be glad to," Sergei said.

"It's not a job for children," Ivan Ivanovich said, stroking their heads gently.

The children were hurt, but they remained at Ivan Ivanovich's side. They wanted to be a help to their grandfather who had a great deal to worry about: he was getting together supplies for a partisan detachment.

Ivan Ivanovich, gaunt, weak, and despondent at his helplessness thought constantly of his burned home. Grandpa Misha guessed what was on his mind.

"Don't be so upset, Ivan. Consider this your home. And when we beat the Germans, we'll build you a mansion like you never dreamed of. To tell the truth, it's about time you had a new house. That shack you lived in was a disgrace for a teacher and school principal. Here, old buddy, drink this hot milk. You'll get your strength back quicker. Look at how thin you are."

Several years before Grandpa Misha's son had decided to live on his own, and had moved into a new house with his wife Anna and their two children. It was on that house that the first bomb had dropped. Fortunately, Sergei and Irina had not been home. After his daughter-in-law's funeral, Grandpa Misha took his grandchildren to live with him.

To get Ivan Ivanovich back on his feet, Grandpa Misha gave him milk and honey, brought freshly baked bread from the bakery every day, and fried potatoes and onions in lard.

The two men had been close friends since the late 1920s, and had been through a lot together. They participated in the dispossession of the rich farmers, and helped form the first collective farm and build a new village. The blacksmith assisted Ivan Ivanovich in supplying the school classrooms, and Ivan Ivanovich helped Grandpa Misha build a new smithy.

There were conflicting opinions concerning their friendship.

"Ivan Ivanovich is a fine man. He is a teacher, yet is best friends with a simple blacksmith."

"It's too bad an educated man and a teacher couldn't find an equal. Being friends with a blacksmith weakens his authority."

"Let people say what they will," Ivan Ivanovich would say. "The more they talk, the stronger our friendship becomes."

And now, feeling his friend's concern and seeing how he and his grandchildren took care of him, Ivan Ivanovich felt even closer to Grandpa Misha.

"Well, Ivan, how are you feeling, old buddy?" Grandpa Misha would ask, his voice full of warmth and tenderness. The teacher did not know just why the words were so special, but he always felt better upon hearing them from his friend.

A little more than a week passed, and Ivan Ivanovich began to recover. The wound was healing and his strength was returning.

One evening the friends talked about news from the front. The reports were not very comforting, though Hitler's *blitzkrieg* had failed. Soviet troops were retreating and suffering heavy losses, but the Germans were paying dearly.

Grandpa Misha told Ivan Ivanovich about his visit to the Regional Party Committee.

"The way things stand, old buddy, you need to hurry and get better. We have serious work ahead. Let's take your first walk outside tomorrow. Do you think you are ready?"

"I've been ready for ages!"

"Then get a good night's sleep. See you in the morning."

The next day was sultry and foggy. It seemed as if everything was enveloped in a thick haze.

"I wouldn't exactly call this fresh air," Grandpa Misha joked. "But never mind, old buddy. It's still good for you."

Ivan Ivanovich stepped outside, leaning on his friend's arm and supported by Irina and Sergei. The light blinded him, even though the sun was hidden in the morning mist.

"Thank you, all. It is fine just as it is. I'm finally on my feet again, and I'm not doing too badly," the teacher said smiling, pleased with himself.

They walked past the well, from which Ivan Ivanovich had drawn water that fateful day, and then down to the river. A fallen asp, covered with moss, lay on the bank, and the four of them sat down on it.

"What time is it?" Ivan Ivanovich asked. "It must still be early. No one in sight."

"It's almost six, yet the village is deserted," Grandpa Misha said. "The farm livestock has been driven east, the shepherd is in the army, and the private cows that still remain graze near the houses. There aren't many people left in the village. Old men like us, women and children."

They fell silent.

Sergei and Irina got up and walked further along the river. Grandpa Misha watched them go.

"Oh, to be young again," he sighed.

"The war will be a lot more frightening for them than for us, so don't envy them," Ivan Ivanovich disagreed.

"You're right."

"But I do envy you, Mikhail," the teacher continued. "You're older than I am but your eyes are sharper, your cheeks are ruddy, and you don't have one wrinkle. And that voice—like a singer in the Bolshoi Theater. Deep and clear. Mine is so quiet and muffled. I don't know whether to blame my profession or my genes. I wonder how I commanded a regiment in the Civil War with a voice like that..."

"Strength isn't in a voice, but in a person's character," Grandpa Misha said.

"You've got strength of iron, good health, and a strong char-

acter," Ivan Ivanovich said. "Just what is needed in these troubled times. Don't forget, the Germans are armed to the teeth."

Talking to his friend, Ivan Ivanovich felt alive again. He straightened his shoulders, his eyes glowed with determination, and he sensed his old energy returning.

They sat for a long time, talking about the enemy and their own unshakable faith in victory, and even comparing the German and Russian characters, which sent the teacher off on his favorite subject—history. He remembered an old saying: "The Prussians have never defeated the Russians, while the Russians dined twice in Berlin."

"It's been over a month since I've heard from my son," Grandpa Misha said suddenly. "He doesn't even know of Anna's death."

"Maybe it's better that way."

"Maybe."

They heard muffled gun fire coming from far beyond the river and the forests.

"The front is getting closer," Grandpa Misha said.

Ivan Ivanovich was silent. He was only too well aware of that.

They didn't notice Sergei and another boy approach until Sergei spoke:

"Breakfast is ready. Irina sent me to get you."

"Thanks, Grandson."

"Who is the other boy?" Ivan Ivanovich asked, ashe and Grandpa Misha walked back.

"Our neighbor's son and a friend of Sergei's. Don't you remember him?" Grandpa Misha said in a neutral tone, not taking his eyes off the river.

"Which neighbor?"

"Shulga."

Ivan Ivanovich stopped.

"Wait! Is that the Shulga who killed the chairman of the village Council during the dispossession of the wealthy farmers?"

"The boy is his grandson."

"And Gerasim Shulga's son. Gerasim is another tricky devil. I heard a lot about his shady dealings."

"But Taras is nothing like his father or grandfather. He is a fine boy," Grandpa Misha assured his friend.

They slowly approached the house. Irina met them at the door.

"We've been waiting for you. Are you hungry?"

"You bet we are," Ivan Ivanovich said. He was ready for a hearty breakfast.

Irina placed bowls of steaming meat dumplings on the table and everyone dug in. Ivan Ivanovich kept up with the others.

"My compliments to the chef!" he said. "These dumplings are

as good as the ones they make in Siberia and the Urals. I had the chance to try them during the Civil War. Who taught you to make them, Irina?"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he regretted saying them. No doubt Irina's mother had taught her.

"Mama," Irina answered tonelessly.

"I'm sorry," Ivan Ivanovich said softly.

There was a moment of silence.

"We'll revenge your mother's death, Irina. Believe me, no matter what it takes, and we'll show no mercy. Right now the army is retreating, but there will come a time..."

He left the sentence unfinished. He did not know what to say, but he was certain that the enemy would be defeated.

The traffic on the highway passing by Berezovka increased with each day. There was a constant flow of cars and carts. More and more army units were headed toward the front, along with artillery and trucks full of guns, ammunition and provisions.

The Germans, it seemed, noticed this because the bombings around Berezovka increased.

New graves appeared in the old cemetery at the edge of the village. One in every three families had lost someone close.

Irina and Sergei seemed to grow up overnight. They had become stern, serious, and calm, particularly ten-year-old Irina. She had taken over all the cooking and housekeeping, and looked after Ivan Ivanovich, her brother and grandfather. She cooked, washed, brought the water, worked in the garden, and did it all willingly.

That morning Ivan Ivanovich was particularly aware of how she had changed. Irina cleared the table and served tea. Taras, who had stayed for breakfast, quickly stirred in some sugar and took a gulp, burning his tongue.

"Where is your father, Taras?" Ivan Ivanovich asked.

"In prison," the boy said in a barely audible voice, blushing with shame. "I thought you knew."

"No, I didn't, but I can't say I'm surprised."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"A son is not responsible for his father's actions, Taras. The important thing is that you grow up to be an honest man."

Suddenly they heard the hum of planes, and ran outside.

"More Junkers," Ivan Ivanovich said.

"Eighteen of them," Grandpa Misha added.

Everyone thought of the sorrow and misery those enemy planes left in their wake, and Irina shook her fist in the air and shouted: "Just you wait, you cursed Nazis!"

II

Sergei and Taras sat on a small hill near the highway and watched the lines of trucks and carts. They did not have anything particular to do, but there on the road, they felt closer to the frontline somehow. Each was lost in his own thoughts.

Sergei thought of his father, who had left to fight as soon as the war began. And Taras? He was also thinking of his father, who, instead of being at the front with the others, sat in prison, a convicted criminal. He also thought of his mother who was seriously ill.

A truck stopped on the opposite side of the highway, the door opened and a young, thin soldier jumped from the cab. He undid his belt, straightened his field shirt, buckled his belt, and looked around. He noticed the two boys.

"Come over here, fellows!"

Sergei and Taras were beside him in seconds.

"Hello," the soldier said. His face was very tan and his teeth shone white. His faded shirt was dark with perspiration, his boots were dusty, and his cap was stained.

"What is the name of this village?" he asked, his white teeth sparkling.

"Berezovka," Sergei was the first to answer.

"It's the one, then," the soldier said happily. "I thought so. Do the Esins live here?"

Sergei, who had acted very grown up and sure of himself, suddenly shrank. "The Esins?" he repeated.

"The Esins' house burned down during the first bombing," Taras said.

The soldier wiped the perspiration streaming down his cheeks and neck with a grey handkerchief, took two letters out of his pocket, and read the address on one of them:

"Anna Esin. The village of Berezovka. Do you know her?"

Sergei started, as if he had been hit. He wanted to say something but could not speak.

"That is Sergei's mother," Taras explained sadly, pointing to his friend. "She died and their house burned down to the ground."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," the soldier said, taking off his cap. He stood with his head down, not knowing what to say. Then he repeated: "I'm sorry, Sergei. I'm sorry, my friend."

Only then did Sergei notice that he spoke with a slight accent.

"You see, the infantry battalion under your father's command was fighting at the border," the soldier continued. "Everything went well until three days ago when we were surrounded. Fortunately, we managed to get out of it and are back fighting.

Your father sent me for ammunition, and since he knew I'd be near Berezovka, he gave me these letters. My name is Amanov."

"Are you a Tatar?" Taras asked.

"No, I'm Uzbek."

"Take me with you, Amanov. I beg you," Sergei cried suddenly, and grabbed the soldier's hand.

"Where?" The soldier was taken aback.

"To my father," Sergei said. "I'll help him."

"Your father is on the frontline where there is death at every step," Amanov said. "It is too dangerous."

"Isn't it dangerous for you, and for my father, and for the other soldiers?"

"Yes, but..." the soldier said gently, stroking Sergei's blond curls.

"I miss my father so much," Sergei said, and began to cry. No matter how Amanov tried to calm him, Sergei continued to sob, his head buried in the soldier's chest. Kissing the boy on the cheek, Amanov held out the letters:

"Here, Sergei. Take these. They are from your father."

"Thank you," Sergei said as he took the envelopes. He embraced Amanov.

"Listen, fellows, let's go into the village for a few minutes. We have a little time and I can get water there."

Soon they were all sitting around the table at Grandpa Misha's. He and Ivan Ivanovich pelted Amanov with questions about the front, Captain Esin, and what they should expect.

Listening to Amanov, Ivan Ivanovich recalled his youth, the Civil War years, exhausting marches through the Shirabad Steppe and the Baisun Mountains of Central Asia. He remembered the kind, brave Uzbeks and Tajiks, his comrades in battles with the Basmatchi gangs.

"I'm sorry, but I didn't ask your name," Ivan Ivanovich said.

"Boboyor Amanov."

"Wait a minute," Ivan Ivanovich said, trying to remember something. He looked at the soldier carefully. "*Bobo* means grandfather."

"That's right. How do you know?"

The children exchanged glances: what a teacher they had—he knew everything.

"Are you from the shores of the Kairaksai River?"

"Yes!" Amanov was again surprised.

"And *yor* means... I knew it, but can't remember."

"*Yor* means defender, protector, guide, teacher. That's what my grandmother told me when I was a child. She said I was given that name so my grandfather would always be my protector

and teacher. And he was just that. He took part in the Civil War, fought the Basmatchi, and then was elected chairman of the first collective farm in Uzbekistan."

"Maybe I knew your grandfather," Ivan Ivanovich said. "We fought in the same places."

"You were in Uzbekistan?" Amanov asked.

"Yes, I fought there. I remember the Kairaksai River and the Baisun mountains."

"My grandfather is no longer alive, but perhaps I can consider you my grandfather, since you may have been his friend in the war and were a friend of our people."

"I did know Amanov," Ivan Ivanovich suddenly remembered. "He was in our cavalry regiment. Was his name Rakhmat?"

"Yes, it was!" Amanov said, amazed.

"Then I can definitely consider you my grandson," Ivan Ivanovich said, deeply moved, and went over to Boboyor. "Let me embrace you, my boy."

A truck horn sounded on the street. Boboyor stood up, straightened his field shirt, put on his cap and saluted:

"Forgive me, but I must go. I have no right to hold the others up any longer," he said, throwing his sub-machine gun over his shoulder.

"*Barakalla*," Ivan Ivanovich said in Uzbek.

"What a teacher we have!" Sergei thought proudly.

Ivan Ivanovich looked at Amanov. "I now have a grandson," he thought. "I've been a bachelor my entire life, though I've dedicated it to children. I didn't manage to get married when I was young, what with the war and so many important things to do after it. Maybe I began to teach because I dreamed of children of my own. Actually, it's not true I have no children. Think of my students scattered all over. And now there is Boboyor Amanov."

The soldier embraced the old men and then Sergei and Taras, and ran to the truck.

At that moment Irina came home, and was upset that she had missed the soldier who had come from her father.

"Here are the letters," Sergei said, "I'll read them now. Maybe this one first?" he said, pointing to the letter addressed to their mother.

"Of course, Sergei. Read it," Grandpa Misha said. "Even if she isn't with us..."

"My dearest Anna," Sergei began. "Forgive me for not writing in so long. I am fine, but we have been through some very difficult battles..."

Everyone was silent. Irina cried quietly.

"Read the second one," Grandpa Misha said when Sergei finished. "How sad that such a wonderful letter arrived too late for Anna to read."

"Dear Irina and Sergei,

"How are you, my dear children? We are involved in very intense fighting along the entire front. The situation is extremely serious. Though the battalion I command is retreating we are making the enemy pay dearly for each inch of our land. I have trained, experienced soldiers, as well as many new recruits who are mere boys, but they all fight valiantly, not sparing their lives to defend their country. My battalion is made up of Russians, Uzbeks, Ukrainians, Tatars, Yakuts and Moldavians—a real international group.

"These are difficult days for us. The enemy is strong, cruel and shrewd, but we are stronger still since we are in the right and are defending our own land.

"We know that people in the rear are tirelessly working for victory. You, my children, are two of these people. Make me proud of you. As Stalin said: 'the enemy will be beaten, victory will be ours!'

"Much love to you both..."

Their father had been inducted into the army a year before the war. Prior to that, he had worked as an agronomist at the Kalinin Collective Farm in Berezovka.

Until June, 1941, he had written often, but since the war began, this was only the second time they had heard from him. The first letter had come from Kaunas at the beginning of July.

Everyone sat in silence. Irina had stopped crying.

"I can take a little credit for there being so many people like Esin," Ivan Ivanovich thought. "A new generation has grown up since the 1917 Revolution, people dedicated to serving their country and willing to defend it to their deaths. It's impossible to defeat such people. Esin mentioned Stalin in his letter. His speech of July 3rd inspired the entire country to fight against the Nazi invaders, and made it clear that every Soviet citizen has a part to play in that struggle: the soldier in the army, the worker in the rear, and the partisans. Every single person must work for victory."

"You can be proud of your father," Ivan Ivanovich said. "He is a real man, a real soldier, and a real patriot. Just think, a person from our village has become a distinguished commander of the Red Army."

He noticed that Taras had hung his head, and felt pity for the boy. The teacher stood up, looked at everyone, and suddenly began to recite a poem:

Waken me early tomorrow,
Dear mother, patient and kind!
I'll go past the boundary barrow
To welcome a friend of mine.

In the forest today I noticed
Wheel-tracks where a cart had rolled.
The breeze below dark cloud blowing
Is ruffing the arch of gold.

It will race by tomorrow at daybreak,
With moon-cap ducking under a bush,
And her red tail playfully waving
The mare through the meadow will rush.

Waken me early tomorrow,
Turn the light on in our neat room.
They say I'll become an illustrious
Poet of Russia soon.

"Do you remember, Sergei?" he asked.

"How could I forget, Ivan Ivanovich?"

It had been two years before. Teachers, students and parents gathered in the school auditorium on the occasion of the 22nd anniversary of the Revolution. After the speeches, a program was put on by the students. Sergei recited that poem of Sergei Esenin's, and did very well. Perhaps part of his success was due to the fact that he resembled the young Esenin. He was well built with curly blond hair and blue eyes. As he recited, his face either glowed with a clear smile, or became thoughtful, calm or nervous. His gestures were also very expressive.

When he finished, the auditorium burst into loud applause. Sergei was embarrassed, and quickly left the stage to join his parents.

Since then he was kiddingly called Sergei Esenin.

"So you haven't forgotten," Ivan Ivanovich smiled.

"I like this poem best of all," the boy continued:

Hey there, Russia, mother country,
Cottages in icon guise...
Never-ending land of wonder,
Vistas blue that suck the eyes.

Like a passing holy pilgrim
On your fields I turn my gaze,

On the outskirts of poor villages
Rustling poplars pine and fade.

Smelling of sweet honey and apples
Churches celebrate the Lord
And the sounds of festive dancing
Fill the fields and meadows broad.

Off into the open country
Down a beaten path I run
And to meet me, light as catkins,
Peals of girlish laughter come.

If the heavenly host should beg me:
"Come to live in heaven above!"
I shall say: "Don't give me heaven
But the Russia that I love."

"Beautiful," the teacher agreed. "They say when Esenin was young, he was full of mischief and always spoiling for a fight. You aren't like that at all."

"Is that bad?" Sergei asked.

But before Ivan Ivanovich could answer, Irina shouted from outside:

"The school is burning!"

Everyone ran outside, and then back into the house for buckets.

"How did it happen?" Ivan Ivanovich asked, running over.

"A German plane flew over and... Oh, how terrible!"

Grandpa Misha quickly organized everyone in a human chain, leading from the school to the river. They passed buckets of water up from the river and the empty ones back down. Over one hundred people fought the fire, but the flames continued.

Suddenly, they again heard the rumble of planes.

"The devils are flying," someone shouted. "Everyone lie down!"

People threw themselves on the ground, and just in time. Five German planes flew low over the village, firing their machine-guns. Seeing the burning school and the people gathered there, they began to circle the building, spraying the earth with bullets. After circling a few times the planes regained altitude and flew off to the west apparently having exhausted their ammunition.

"Taras is dying," Irina suddenly shouted from the river.

Ivan Ivanovich stood up hurriedly.

"Sergei, run and help!"

The boy raced to the river, followed by Ivan Ivanovich and Grandpa Misha. The others stayed behind to put out the remains of the fire.

Taras lay at the water's edge. The sand under him was red with blood.

According to Irina, when Taras was hit, he fell, blinked several times and lost consciousness. She had sprinkled water on his face, but he had not come to. That was when she had begun to shout that he was dying.

People gathered around Taras. His lips were pale. They carefully turned him over and saw two wounds, one under his left shoulder and the second on his chest.

"The bullet went through. It looks like it entered his back, brushed against a bone, and came out his chest," Ivan Ivanovich said.

Grandpa Misha quickly took off his shirt and ripped it in wide strips. The teacher tried to stop the blood with a piece of cloth.

"We need smelling salts," Ivan Ivanovich said.

"And iodine," Grandpa Misha added. "Does anyone have some?"

Someone hurried back to the village. In a few minutes they had cotton, iodine and smelling salts. Irina held a piece of cotton soaked in smelling salts under Taras'nose. He started.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

He moaned loudly.

"Hold on a little longer, son," Ivan Ivanovich said, supporting the boy's head. "Misha," he turned to his friend, "you lift him up and I'll bandage the wound. We need to stop the blood."

When they finished, Grandpa Misha picked up the boy and everyone returned to the village.

"Taras shouldn't be taken home right away. His mother is seriously ill. This could kill her."

"I know," Grandpa Misha said. "He can stay with me until he is better."

Taras was laid in the same bed that Ivan Ivanovich had occupied a short time before.

"A lucky spot," Grandpa Misha joked. "But we need to find a medical person, even if it's just the doctor's assistant. The wound is serious."

Irina ran to get him.

Taras bravely endured the pain. All he asked was that his mother not be told just yet. The neighbors gathered outside. Many glanced anxiously in the window. Irina returned with Matvei Semyonovich, the doctor's assistant.

"I've never seen bullet wounds," he confessed. "But I'll do what I can."

He examined Taras, cleaned the wound and put on a fresh dressing.

"I think he'll be all right, though the wound is serious."

Ivan Ivanovich told those outside the news. A spontaneous meeting began. People spoke of love for their country and hatred of fascism. No one had come for that, no one had called them together, but they all felt the desire to express their thoughts.

In their bungling, yet sincere speeches, they included what they had read in the papers and heard on the radio, but those much repeated, familiar phrases were expressed with fervor, and for that reason were important and inspiring.

Ivan Ivanovich listened to the others and thought about what he should say to his friends and neighbors. When it was his turn he began:

"You have all spoken well, my dear friends. Our Berezovka is not very great when you think of Russia or the entire Soviet Union, but it is part of a great concept—that of homeland. Our homeland is in danger and that danger has reached our village. The Germans have bombed it, and we were not intimidated. They have shed our blood, and we have endured. And we will continue to resist until the enemy is defeated, no matter what the cost.

"We just had the chance to talk to Boboyor Amanov who came from the front, and learned that our army is in a fighting spirit.

"We just read letters from our own Captain Esin who wrote that the soldiers and officers of our army are prepared to die rather than allow our land to be desecrated.

"There are severe trials ahead, and, God forbid, we may soon be face to face with the enemy. I am certain that every one of us will fulfill his duty with honor.

"The Nazis have underestimated us. After marching victoriously through Europe, they hoped to break us with one blow. But that they could not do and never will. The Soviet people are not one to give in to the enemy.

"We are living under the severe conditions of wartime. You must ask yourselves and each other: what did I do today for the war effort? What did I do to hasten victory over the German invaders? Let us make a promise to live so that none of us will ever be ashamed to answer those questions."

Ivan Ivanovich fell silent.

"We swear!" a voice shouted from the crowd.

The residents of Berezovka, both adults and children, took the oath, including Irina, Sergei, Grandpa Misha and Ivan Ivanovich. Even Taras, who heard all that was happening outside, whispered to himself: "I swear!"

III

At the end of August the situation at the front remained critical. In response to the German attack on the Central Front, the Soviet troops on the Western Front began active fighting. The 30th, 19th and 24th armies, spread out from the source of the Western Dvina to the city of Yartsev, delivered blows to the 9th German Army's flank. The enemy set up a strong defense along the eastern bank of the Vop River.

After regrouping, the enemy delivered a crushing blow at the point where the 22nd and 29th armies met, attempting to break through to the rear around Velikiye Luki. The Germans succeeded in surrounding the main force of the 22nd Army and the 29th was forced to retreat.

The Soviet General Headquarters ordered the troops of the Western Reserve and Bryansk Front to conduct an active defense to be able to counterattack in early September.

Yet, the Germans continued their advance on Berezovka.

The partisan detachment organized in the area had already left for the forest. They drove the cattle that remained after evacuation deep into the woods and stored extra provisions and weapons formerly belonging to the military commissariat and the militia. The Regional Party Committee had also received new weapons to arm the detachment.

Shakhov, the chairman of the Kalinin Collective Farm, was assigned to command the partisan detachment.

One evening Sergei and Irina were unexpectedly summoned to Fedotov, secretary of the village Soviet. The children knew him well. He had fought in the Civil War and lost both legs near the town of Samara. He walked on heavy, creaking artificial legs, and his gait was slow and cautious. Ivan Ivanovich, Martynov, a truck driver, and two unfamiliar people were also at Fedotov's.

"You called us?" Sergei asked uncertainly.

"Yes. We've been waiting for you," Fedotov nodded. He picked up the candle and walked over to the children. "Would you like to become partisans?"

Sergei first looked at Irina, and then at Ivan Ivanovich, and did not know what to say. Everyone was silent. The boy buttoned the top button of his shirt, and stood up straight.

"Yes, we would!" he said loudly.

"Good for you. We need to get in touch with Shakhov. I heard both of you are itching to get into battle, especially you, Sergei. Am I right?"

"Yes, sir," Sergei said.

"We have decided to give you an assignment. But first I'll outline the situation," Fedotov continued. "The Germans are very close. In fact, several units may already be in the nearby wood. You know Shakhov, don't you?"

"Of course," both Irina and Sergei answered.

"He and his men are also in the forest. Have a look at this map," he said, spreading out a large, green sheet of paper with yellow and blue splotches. "He is somewhere here. You'll have to search for him."

Despite his years, Fedotov was tall and thin, and his field shirt looked well on him. He spoke precisely and quickly, constantly pushing back his black hair, which showed no signs of grey.

"Don't set out at night, you could get lost. Better leave at dawn," Fedotov suggested. "Do not tell anyone about your assignment. If you meet any Germans, say you are looking for your cow. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Irina said.

"Yes, sir," Sergei said in a military manner.

The children returned home.

"Where have you been?" Grandpa Misha asked. "Taras and I have been bored without you."

"We were out," Sergei said evasively.

Irina immediately began to fix supper.

"How are you feeling?" Sergei asked Taras.

"O.K., but my head begins to spin when I walk," Taras said. "I couldn't carry out any kind of assignment right now."

"How does he know about our assignment?" Sergei thought in surprise. "Or is it just a coincidence? Maybe I'm imagining things?"

Taras began to talk about something else, and Sergei relaxed.

"Will you join us, or should I bring you your supper in bed?" Irina asked Taras as she set the table.

"I'll get up," he said, and slowly crawled out of bed. He was unsteady on his feet and Grandpa Misha helped him to the table.

"Grandpa, did you listen to the report?" Sergei asked.

They did not have a radio, so Grandpa Misha went to the neighbors'.

"Yes, but there is nothing new. The sound of the artillery is getting closer and closer, and there seems to be more of it in the daytime. Do you think the Germans are afraid to fight at night?"

"I don't know," Sergei said.

"There weren't any battles at night during the Civil War either," Grandpa Misha continued. "Of course, there were a few, but basically the enemy rested at night, to gather his strength."

"War is probably different now," Irina said.

"Yes. It looks like this one will be the most difficult of all," Grandpa Misha said, and stood up wearily. "That's enough talk. It's time to go to bed. It's late."

But Sergei and Irina could not sleep. They were up as soon as it was light. Quietly, so as not to awaken Grandpa Misha, Taras and Ivan Ivanovich who had returned after midnight, they tiptoed outside.

The sun had not yet come up from behind the forest, yet it was already hot. The weather at the end of August was stifling. The marshes had dried up, the mosquitoes, which had pestered the children a short time ago, had disappeared, and no rain had fallen for a month. The leaves on the trees rustled limply. Black ashes covered the ground where Ivan Ivanovich's home, the school, and several other houses had once stood, and patches of dried, yellow grass grew among them. The heat wave even dried out the slopes along the river, and the river itself had receded from its banks, leaving dried mud, branches and water weeds. On the opposite shore, thin, dry sedge rose high above the water level, and brown cat-o'-nine tails swayed gently. The ground around the birch trees was already covered with fallen leaves.

Sergei and Irina hurried along the river.

"Do you remember what was on the map?" Irina asked.

"Of course," Sergei said.

"Are you happy?"

"About what?"

"What do you mean, about what? That you got your first military assignment."

"I'd be happier if I were fighting next to Dad at the front," he answered sharply.

He truly envied his father, particularly after meeting Amanov. At night he dreamed of battles in which his father's battalion took part, and Sergei admired the bravery of the commander and his soldiers, ones like Boboyor Amanov.

In the village people considered Sergei to be a quiet, calm, sober-minded boy, but there was more to him than this. His love for the poetry of Esenin, Pushkin, Lermontov, Blok, and the still little known Isakovsky combined with a love for romantic feats which he felt belonged to the past and had occurred during the revolution, the Civil War, on frontier posts, at Khasan and Khalkhin-Gol in Mongolia, in the Karelian Isthmus, and in Spain. And now, when the time had again come to prove oneself, it was not he, but adults like his father and thousands like him, who were fighting the Nazis, while he had to stay in Berezovka, as usual. True, it was not easy there either—there were bombings,

fires and deaths—but nevertheless, Sergei dreamed of an opportunity to show himself to be a real hero.

The path from the river climbed uphill. The children passed a spruce grove with small trees, unusually green for such a hot summer, went through a birch wood, and past raspberry bushes with fallen berries. They crossed a rickety bridge of two planks to the opposite side of the river which lay motionless in the deep forest. Finally they came to a road covered with dry leaves with barely noticeable ruts.

In contrast to her brother, Irina was happy.

"It's just not an ordinary assignment, but a Communist Party one," she thought. The Regional Party Committee had virtually gone underground, and that meant their assignment was secret. That was why Fedotov had ordered them to tell no one.

It would seem Sergei and Irina knew the forest around Berezovka well, but even they discovered something new that day.

"Not only Nazis, but even wolves would be scared here," Irina said.

The heat intensified. The children rested a bit and then continued on. Their clothes were soon wet with perspiration, and their bruised and blistered feet ached. But their sense of duty pushed out all other considerations. They had already gone over ten kilometers, but there were no partisans in sight.

"Could we be lost?" Irina asked anxiously.

"No. Fedotov pointed out this road," Sergei assured her.

"Do you think Taras will get better?" Irina asked, when they had again sat down to rest. Staring at the top of a birch, she recalled how he had been wounded, and how he had fallen on the sand with a bullet wound in his chest.

Sergei, preoccupied with thoughts of their urgent assignment, grew angry with her.

"Now is not the time to be thinking of Taras."

"I just asked," Irina said, hurt. They both sat in silence.

They resumed their journey, and soon the road led to a small clearing. The sun's rays filtered through the tree tops.

"Look!" Irina cried out happily.

"I see, I see. Quiet!"

Sergei had also noticed the lone horse, black with a white patch on his withers, grazing in the clearing.

"Wait. We need to look around," Sergei said. "What if the horse is a German one?"

They stopped and hid behind a large, old oak. Minutes passed and no one appeared.

"I have an idea," Sergei said. "I'll help you up on the horse and you can ride."

"Are you crazy?"

"Look at your feet. You can hardly walk."

"So."

"It will be easier for you, that's all."

"Your feet are blistered, too."

"I'm a man."

At this point, they noticed a small skewbald colt grazing some distance from the horse. Sergei relaxed a little. "That's probably a collective farm horse. They are almost all skewbald."

Suddenly the leaves over their heads rustled and they looked up in fright. A young man was sitting in the branches of the oak. He jumped down gracefully. He had blue eyes, a field cap pulled down over his forehead, and was dressed in a pale green shirt, buttoned up to the collar. He looked at the silent children and smiled. There was a revolver in his hand.

"Who are you?"

"Are you from the partisan detachment?" Sergei asked, answering his question with a question.

"Could be," the young man said. "What are you doing here?"

"We are looking for our cow," Irina said suddenly.

"Listen to her, the dummy. You're really something, Irina," Sergei said, laughing.

"Are you the Esin kids?" the fellow asked. "You look familiar."

"That's right," Sergei answered, wondering whether he should tell the man about their assignment. After all, he is one of ours. But as it turned out, there was no need to explain anything.

"Come with me," the young man said. "I've known your Dad since I was a kid," he continued, once they were on their way. "That was before he went into the army, when he worked as an agronomist. And I knew your mother too, may she rest in peace."

They walked along a faint path. Someone called to them on two occasions and the young man answered the unseen guards with the password "charge".

The children were struck with the importance of what was happening.

Soon they could see dugouts and people near them. Sergei and Irina noticed many familiar faces from their village. Shakhov came out of one of the dugouts.

"The Esins!" he said in surprise.

"I think they're here to see you," the young man said.

The children greeted Shakhov, and then Sergei handed him an envelope.

"This is for you."

"Come inside," Shakhov said. "Are you tired?"

"Not very," Sergei said.

"Not very? By the looks of your feet you should be exhausted," Shakhov commented.

Once inside the commander seated the children at a table and gave them bread and tea. Then he began to read the letter.

"Fine," he said finally. "We also have important information. I'll write it down while you two get some rest. Lie down for an hour or two. You came a long way."

At first Sergei protested, but as soon as he crawled into the low bunk, he fell asleep. Irina also was asleep in minutes. Apparently they slept for some time, because when they awoke and left the empty dugout, it was late afternoon.

Sergei was worried—where was Shakhov?

The partisan camp seethed with life. There were six neatly built dugouts along the edge of the field, and people were busy cleaning weapons, chopping wood, sewing, and cooking. A pleasant aroma came from the two field kitchens. Some distance away, in nearby clearings, cows and horses grazed. Rows of carts stood in the shade.

Shakhov suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

"We didn't want to wake you. Are you rested?"

He gave the children food for the trip back, and an envelope.

"How far are the Germans from here?" Sergei asked.

"They are eight kilometers away, at the Bobino train station," Shakhov explained. "Day before yesterday they dropped a landing party near here, but we annihilated it. So you can relax. I don't think you'll meet any Germans."

The trip back seemed easier. There was no need to hurry and the weather had cooled off a bit toward evening. The children knew that they had to walk seventeen kilometers, which would take them about three hours. They picked mushrooms and berries, and were glad they had taken their baskets with them. The sun could still be seen above the forest when they reached Berezovka. There they stopped in surprise. A lot of trucks with red crosses stood in the village. Two large tents had been put up near the highway, and people in white smocks moved about them.

It had been absolutely quiet in the forest, but now, they could hear the distant rumble of explosions and machine-gun fire coming from beyond the river. Several trucks drove by followed by large guns, small tanks, and carts filled with cargo. There seemed to be no end to the transport train.

"Are you from here?" someone called out to them.

The children turned and saw a pretty young woman with a white smock over her military uniform.

"Yes," Irina said, "would you like some," she offered, holding out the basket.

"Thank you," the woman said, and took a few berries. "They are delicious. We're so busy we don't have time to enjoy what is around us."

Irina liked the gentle woman immediately.

"Come to our house, please," she said unexpectedly. "If just for a few minutes."

"I can probably spare a few minutes."

"Maybe you can look at Taras?" Sergei asked.

"Who is Taras?"

"Our friend. He was wounded when the Nazis strafed our village."

"Of course, I'll have a look at him," the woman agreed. "By the way, my name is Valentina. You can call me Valya."

The children did not know that Valya had a daughter about their age, and that they reminded her of her home and family. She was anxious to help them in some way, and even had the urge to hug them, as if they were her own children.

"Are you a nurse?" Irina asked.

"That's right."

As soon as they reached the house, the woman washed her hands and began to examine Taras. Grandpa Misha and Ivan Ivanovich were not home. Valya cleaned the wound with alcohol, put on a salve, and bandaged it.

"I'll be right back," Sergei whispered to Irina, and hurried out the door. His sister understood—he was going to Fedotov.

Sergei raced to the other end of the village. Fedotov was very glad to see him. He read Shakhov's letter.

"Good for both of you!" he said. "But it's a pity they don't have all the information on the Germans. You see, the enemy is advancing on Berezovka from the other side. We have just organized a fighting detachment and sent it to help the army in the Veselovski Forest."

"Let me go too."

"Where?" Fedotov asked. "I need you here. I would like to be on the fighting lines too, but the order is to remain. We will have our hands full in Berezovka too."

Valya soon finished.

"Your friend will be fine," she said. "Just be sure he eats well and gets plenty of fresh air. Keep the windows open."

It was beginning to get dark.

"I must go now," Valya said. "I'm on duty tonight, and they've probably brought in more wounded." She left medicine, gauze and alcohol, and showed Irina how to bandage Taras' wound.

Irina walked with the nurse back to her unit. As soon as they

reached the spital tent, they heard the command: "To the trucks!"

"Does that mean you are going to the front?" Irina asked.

"More likely, just the opposite," Valya said sadly. "Farther from the front. Our work is such that you can't do it on the front-lines."

"I wish you all the best," Irina said and embraced her. They kissed each other and there were tears in their eyes.

"Good luck to you too, dear," Valya said. "I didn't ask you about your parents."

"My father is at the front and Mama died...." Irina lowered her head.

Valya was silent.

"She was killed in a bombing raid," Irina continued.

"Be strong," Valya said, and hugged her again.

Irina still stood on the side of the road when the trucks of the field hospital pulled out of the village.

"Valya is a lot like Mama," she thought.

Valya was riding in a bus with the seriously wounded, and could not see outside. She did not know Irina was watching her go, but was thinking about her all the same. "That little girl is so much like my daughter, Natasha."

It was now completely dark. As Irina approached the house, the stopped at the window. Grandpa Misha and Ivan Ivanovich were arguing about something. She listened.

"No, Ivan! No, old buddy," Grandpa Misha boomed in his deep voice. "You are wrong."

"No need to shout, Misha. I'm not deaf," Ivan Ivanovich said. "And Taras is in the next room. The boy is still weak. It is a complicated problem and can't be solved rashly."

"So what did I say? I just said you are wrong," Grandpa Misha's voice grew softer. "I said it because I love you, old buddy."

"Love is one thing, and facts are another," Ivan Ivanovich calmly explained. "There is an old saying: 'look before you leap.'"

"There is another saying: 'get while the getting is good,'" Grandpa Misha retorted. "While you are looking, the Germans will take Berezovka and hang the both of us. You first because you are a Communist."

At this point Ivan Ivanovich noticed Irina standing by the window.

"Where have you been all day? Visiting? We were about to go look for you," Grandpa Misha said with a frown, but his eyes shone with happiness. "Well, tell us where you've been. And where is Sergei?"

No sooner had he spoken than Sergei and Fedotov entered.

"Ivan Ivanovich..."

The two men went to the next room and spoke quietly. Then they returned.

"The problem is solved," Ivan Ivanovich said happily. "Get your things together, Misha."

"What do you mean?"

"Shakhov is waiting for us."

"That's right," Fedotov said.

"What about Irina and Sergei?" Grandpa Misha asked, looking at Ivan Ivanovich and Fedotov.

Irina and Sergei also looked pleadingly at Fedotov.

"You stay in the village for a bit," Fedotov said firmly. "With me."

"You and your 'look before you leap,'" Grandpa Misha joked.

"And your 'get while the getting is good'," Ivan Ivanovich countered. "How would it be if I ran off to the forest without waiting for orders.

IV

Taras was worried about his mother, though he knew Irina went to see her every day and did what she could.

Zoya Andreyevna had been confined to her bed for some time. She had a severe heart attack soon after her husband was convicted. She was very weak, and her arms and legs refused to obey. The doctors had recommended a hospital stay, but she had categorically refused. Who could think of a hospital when there was a war going on!

She was quite worn out from her illness, and then Taras disappeared. While Irina and Sergei tried to reassure her and brought her notes from her son, she still worried terribly. Her heart spells occurred more frequently. Irina did what she could to take the woman's mind off things, trying to hide the fact that Taras had been wounded, but it was not easy. She pitied his mother, and spent all her free time with her. While she hesitated to tell her the truth, she could no longer lie.

One day Sergei came with Irina to visit the sick woman. Since Sergei was Taras' one and only friend, the woman was very glad to see him. She cheered up and smiled, almost as if she were seeing Taras. Her face shone. She kissed Sergei on the forehead, and had him sit next to her. Everyone fell silent.

"I'm very grateful to you both," Taras' mother finally spoke. "You see, since that happened with my husband, a lot of people

have avoided me. I'm not condemning them. He truly is a scoundrel! I don't understand how I could have fallen in love with such a man. I suspected he was involved in something illegal, though he never brought anything home. He spent it somewhere else. On women they said. Everything came out at the trial. You can't imagine how much he stole and the kind of bribes he gave. He was sentenced to six years in prison."

Sergei and Irina had only heard snatches of what had happened. While they were friends with Taras, he never talked about his father. Either he did not know himself, or he was ashamed.

Talking about her husband upset Zoya Andreyevna, and she clutched her heart. Irina hurried to give her medicine, and Sergei put a damp cloth on her forehead.

"Time goes on and I'm not getting better or worse," she continued. "I'm tired of being sick. Sometimes I think it would be best if one of those bombs fell on me, and I'd be released from this suffering. Look at how much trouble I cause Irina. Sergei, my dear boy, where is Taras? Why doesn't he come home?" she dropped her head on the pillow and tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Don't get so upset," Sergei said. "Taras is fine."

"If he is fine, why doesn't he come home? Every time the door opens I think it's Taras. I'm tired of waiting, son. You are keeping something from me. It would be better to tell me. The truth is always better than a lie."

While Sergei tried to reassure Taras' mother, he looked beseechingly at Irina, as if asking her what they should do. Irina did not know what to say, and lowered her eyes. Sergei realized Zoya Andreyevna's health was suffering because of Taras' absence, and decided to tell her the truth.

"I'll be right back! I'll try to find Taras," he said, and ran out the door, motioning to Irina to follow. "Stay with her. We need to calm her down. How long can we hide a son from his mother? She is trying to fight her illness, and needs her strength."

Quite some time passed before Sergei appeared with Taras. He had combed his hair, dressed him in a clean shirt, and helped him walk next door.

"Mama!" Taras cried, and he hugged his mother and sobbed.

Zoya Andreyevna lifted her head, stroked his hair with her weak hand, and kissed his cheeks, unable to hold back her tears.

"My dear boy, were you so busy you couldn't visit your sick mother?"

Taras hugged his mother tightly, and could not speak.

"The day the bombs burned the school, we all went to help put out the fire," Sergei began. "Taras went too. When the fire was

under control, Nazi planes flew over the village. They began firing and Taras was wounded. He lost consciousness. Grandpa Misha and Ivan Ivanovich carried him to our house. That's all..."

Sergei stopped, and when Zoya Andreyevna had calmed down, he told her about Valya the nurse, and Matvei Semyonovich, the doctor's assistant. The colour returned to her cheeks, and she had stopped crying and was listening carefully.

"You were right to tell me the truth," she said finally. "I feel better already. Much better. I confess, I had all kinds of terrible thoughts. Now they're gone, thank God." She paused thoughtfully. "What cruel monsters! Shooting at little children and civilians. They attack a peaceful country without declaring war, and destroy its towns and villages. I heard they even bombed a church in the regional center."

"That's true," Irina said. "I saw it when I went to the hospital for medicine. They said a priest was killed."

Taras' mother crossed herself.

"Strange," Sergei thought. "I didn't know she was religious."

Irina remained with Taras and his mother, while Sergei went outside to get water. A camp had been set up between the well and the river. There were about two hundred soldiers. Sergei walked over.

"Hello."

"Hi," a young lieutenant answered. "Would you give us a drink?"

Sergei drew a bucket of water from the well and handed it to the soldiers.

"More, please."

After those around the well had drunk their fill, Sergei took another bucketful to the soldiers working near the river.

"Thanks, buddy," the men said.

"Let's get acquainted," the lieutenant suggested, slapping Sergei on the shoulder.

"My name's Sergei," the boy replied.

"Lieutenant Temirov," the officer said. "What grade are you in?"

"Finished the fifth and will be in the sixth. But our school burned," Sergei began and then stopped.

"So you are thirteen."

"Will be soon," he said. "Are you retreating?"

"Well, I guess you could say that we are digging in a new spot. On this river." The lieutenant paused. "All the way from the border everyone asks the same thing. What can I say? For now the enemy is stronger than we are. It has more tanks, planes, weapons, and even soldiers. That's called military superiority. But it won't last for long."

"When will we take the offensive?"

"As soon as winter sets in."

"Why winter?"

"First, our reserves are still on their way, and second, the Germans didn't count on our winter. They expected to defeat us with one blow. And there's something else. Every battle is a learning experience for us. For example, I went to a military academy after I graduated from school, but I didn't learn as much in all those years as I have in these last two months."

"It would be wonderful," Sergei said dreamily.

"What would?" the lieutenant asked.

"To stop the Germans."

"Maybe we'll stop them here on this river."

"Are they close?"

"About four of five kilometers from here."

"That's real close."

"Will you stay if the worst happens?" the lieutenant asked.

"Of course I will. That's my assignment," Sergei said proudly.

"What kind of assignment, if it's no secret?"

"A Communist Party one."

"Oh, I didn't realize you were so important."

"Everyone must do his part to defeat the enemy," Sergei said.

"You are right," the lieutenant agreed. "Both young and old, soldier and civilian. You're not afraid to come face to face with the enemy?"

"To tell the truth, I am a little. I'm not afraid of the Germans, but that I won't be able to beat them. My father commands a battalion. He isn't afraid of anything, because he is a soldier with a gun. But I don't have a weapon. And I despise cowards."

"Good for you. Thanks for being so honest. Your father brought you up right."

"Are you building fortifications?" Sergei asked.

"Yes. On the left bank of the river. We should be finished by morning."

"Can I help? I just have to take the water home."

"Sure!" the lieutenant agreed.

Sergei worked with the soldiers throughout the night, digging entrenchments and communications trenches. When it got light the young lieutenant found him.

"Can you shoot a gun?"

"If it's a small caliber one."

"And what about a real weapon?"

"I've never tried."

"Would you like to?"

"Would I!"

At first the lieutenant explained how to shoot a rifle, and then a sub-machine-gun. Sergei caught on fast.

"We don't have many sub-machine-guns, but we do have some German ones we captured. I'll show you," the lieutenant said. He handed Sergei a German sub-machine-gun.

"This is how it works..."

After listening carefully, Sergei raised the barrel to the sky and pulled the trigger. His hands shook from the tension.

"Now you can consider yourself ready for battle," the lieutenant praised him.

"Thank you very much, sir," Sergei said, and saluted awkwardly.

V

Work on the fortifications along the river did not end by morning.

"Our job has become more complicated," the lieutenant explained to Sergei. "We are to help the artillerymen prepare gun positions, create a network of machine-gun posts, and set up anti-tank weapons. We have plenty to do for the next few days."

Sergei did not go home and stayed with the machine-gunners, helping them and running errands. He already considered himself a real soldier. He wished he could tell his father, grandfather and Ivan Ivanovich, but unfortunately, that was impossible.

In talking to Temirov, Sergei learned that the lieutenant loved poetry.

"They used to call me Sergei Esenin," the boy admitted in embarrassment.

Temirov seemed to like that.

"O.K., Esenin, take these binoculars and look over there, on the opposite bank." He removed the binoculars from around his neck and handed them to Sergei. "Tell me what you see."

Sergei examined the opposite bank.

"I see guns near the forest. Looks like anti-tank guns."

"Good for you."

"And some soldiers with a machine-gun near three birch trees."

"Right. That is Sergeant Nikonov's squad."

"There are other soldiers digging a ditch in the gully."

"Right again. We decided to use the gully for defense purposes. It's faster and more reliable that way, since the gully itself is fairly deep."

"What company do you command?" Sergei asked.

"We have three, not counting the artillery. I command the Second."

"Is it really terrible at the front?"

"Well, to be completely honest, it is terrifying, since no one wants to die. But our determination to beat the enemy and defend our country is a thousand times stronger than fear. There are only eleven men left in my company. The rest died fighting."

Temirov looked toward the river and shouted:

"Safarov, bring me the binoculars we captured. The ones we got in Illinsk."

A soldier in large boots and faded leggings walked over to the lieutenant.

"The binoculars, sir."

"Thank you, Safarov, " Temirov said. He held them out to Sergei. "A present from me. For your services and as a token of our friendship."

"Gosh!" was all Sergei could say.

"Take them! We confiscated them from a German officer we took prisoner. They'll come in handy, Comrade Esenin!" the lieutenant said, as he smiled and ruffled Sergei's fair hair. "And now march home and get some sleep. No one can work that hard without a rest."

"But..." Sergei began to protest.

"No buts. Consider it an order."

"What about you?"

"We cannot leave this position. The Germans will probably hit soon."

Sergei unwillingly started for home. Only then did he begin to feel how much his legs, arms, shoulders and back hurt.

"I hope I'm not getting sick," he thought. "Now is not the time."

At home Irina and Taras were playing dominoes by candlelight.

"Are you all right?" Irina asked as she ran over to him. "Do you want something to eat?"

"I just want to go to bed," Sergei said. "I'm tired."

"Irina and I decided you had enlisted," Taras joked.

"If only they would take me!" Sergei said, not realizing his friend was joking. "Did Grandpa and Ivan Ivanovich leave?" Sergei asked, getting ready to lie down.

"Yes," Irina said. "They asked me to watch out for you."

"I can watch out for myself," he retorted. Then remembering the binoculars, he added: "Look at these. A company officer gave them to me. They're real German ones." He handed them to Irina and fell asleep.

He dreamed of the river bank marred by trenches, long rows of Soviet soldiers, artillery positions and machine-gun nests about

to join in battle with advancing knights in armor, who looked like the ones in the film *Alexander Nevsky*. They carried long spears, lances and shields, and fearful march music played somewhere.

The enemy soldiers marched and marched, but for some reason they did not move forward, as if marching in place.

The Soviet soldiers waited in silence, not firing a shot. Suddenly one knight broke from the tanks and moved forward quickly. Sergei recognized him—it was Gerasim Shulga, Taras' father.

At that same instant, Taras leaped from the trenches and shouting "I'll kill him", threw himself at his father.

"Stop!" Sergei shouted, and woke up. It was pitch black in the room. In the distance he could hear the rumble of artillery and bursts of machine-gun fire. "Who said Germans don't fight at night?" he thought. He listened carefully.

Down by the river he could make out voices and the sound of shovels. That meant the soldiers were still working. Sergei fell back to sleep.

He again awoke from the sound of gunfire, which was rather close. While it seemed he had not slept very long, it was light outside.

"What was that?" Irina asked, as she leaped out of bed.

They both ran outside.

Enemy artillery was battering the village. There were explosions here and there. People raced madly about, falling on the ground when the artillery fired, and getting up again when it fell silent. Several fires started.

"I'm going to Taras'," Irina said, and ran out the door.

Sergei raced to the river.

A large shell flew above him with a whine and landed on the collective farm barn. Boards flew into the air and the barn burst into flames.

"It's a good thing the chairman ordered the cows to be taken to the forest," Sergei thought.

"Get out of here immediately!" Lieutenant Temirov shouted when he saw him. "Do you hear me? Now!"

Sergei ran to Taras'. Irina and Taras were outside and met him with shouts.

"Look! Look over there!"

Sergei turned around and saw the Germans were concentrating their fire on the opposite shore of the river, where the Red Army soldiers were entrenched.

"They bombed the barn," Sergei said.

"It doesn't matter now. All the livestock are in the rear or in the forest," Irina said.

As soon as the firing lessened, Irina and Taras went back inside to calm Zoya Andreyevna. She was in shock and kept repeating:

"My God, what is happening? Lord Almighty, punish those damn Nazis for their heinous crimes."

Taras hugged his mother.

"Where is Sergei?" she asked.

"With the soldiers again."

"What soldiers?"

"Those who are building fortifications along the river."

"Does that mean the Germans might come here?"

"We have to be prepared for everything," Taras said seriously.

Meanwhile, the soldiers repaired the trenches and artillery positions destroyed by enemy shells. Only one gun had been damaged during the shelling and that was hauled out of the way.

"I'm afraid the enemy is about to attack," Temirov told Sergei when they were on the steep right bank of the river. "That shelling was no accident. Obviously, the Germans know we are building new fortifications here."

Someone called the lieutenant, and he excused himself. He ran to the telephone which was located in one of the nearby trenches. Sergei could hear him saying: "Yes sir... Yes sir." He finally returned.

"Time for you to get out of here."

"Why?"

"Because the battle is about to begin."

"I'm staying with you," Sergei said determinedly.

"You talk as if everything has been decided," Temirov said, beginning to get angry. "You should discuss it with me first."

"I am. Please, I beg you, let me stay. I can shoot now. You taught me yourself."

"What am I going to do with you? It's my own fault. What if something happens to you? You are still very young."

"You're not that old yourself."

"But I'm a soldier."

"And I'm a Young Pioneer, Comrade Lieutenant. Please, Comrade Lieutenant! Please. I beg you."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Temirov said angrily. Then he added a little kinder: "Sergei, go home to your family."

"I don't have a family," he whispered. "My father is at the front, Mama was killed, and Grandpa is in the forest with the partisans. Only my sister is left at home."

"You certainly don't make it easy," the lieutenant said, beginning to soften. "All right. Go to the trenches and I'll tell them to issue you a rifle. But on one condition: during the battle you don't

leave the dugout without orders. Otherwise, I'll send you home immediately."

"Yes, sir," Sergei answered happily.

"Go on then," Temirov said. "Some soldier." Then the lieutenant jumped into an entrenchment and ran off somewhere along a communication trench, shouting to one of the soldiers: "Sokolov, issue this boy a rifle."

They spent the day in anxious waiting. The heat and humidity were exhausting, and the soldiers took turns resting.

The sun slowly set beyond the village, somewhere around the vicinity of Ignatovka.

That evening, retreating soldiers began to come out of the forest, alone or in small groups. Many of the men were wounded.

"Is there a medical unit or hospital in the village?" they asked.

"There was but it was evacuated somewhere to the rear," Sergei explained.

The wounded were placed in the trenches next to the fighting men. They spoke of the situation on the frontlines.

"The Germans just keep pressing."

"We suffered terrible losses."

"There are only two companies left of the regiment, and even they have been depleted."

"Our troops will stand to the last man."

The night passed in relative calm, but toward morning the first units of Hitler's troops came out of the forest. They overran the highway leading into Berezovka. Headlights of trucks and motorcycles crawled closer and closer. The Germans were preparing to take Berezovka in one sweep, and move on to the railroad station beyond the village. They had almost reached the river, yet there was still no order to fire. Each of the enemy's moves was being watched by the artillerymen, the mortar men and the anti-tank gunners.

It began to get light, and one could distinctly make out German soldiers on the highway, tanks moving with a roar, armored carriers and motorcycles. When the front units of the column had almost reached the burned collective farm barn the radio operator handed the lieutenant the telephone.

"Yes sir!" he said after listening, and turned to the machine-gunners. "Fire!"

The anti-tank guns began at the same instant. Shells hit their targets, destroying both men and enemy equipment.

Watching the battle through the openings in the dugout, Sergei was filled with bitter joy as he saw German soldiers crawling along the ground like roaches, and tanks, troop carriers, motorcycles and cars in flames.

But suddenly Nazi planes appeared. Flying low over the field of battle, they began to bomb the Soviet positions. Soon everything on the right bank of the river was destroyed, with only a few burned trees left standing. Then the Germans' long-range guns began to pound the Soviet units.

Sergei did not notice when he leaped from the dugout. The battle became more intense.

"Fire!" Temirov shouted.

Sergei shot twice, but the Germans were too far away.

Soviet guns, anti-tank guns and machine-guns hit their targets. The enemy scattered throughout the field and the movement on the highway slowed. Armored carriers and tanks crawled off the road, and the motorcyclists raced for cover.

Sergei shot once more, and it seemed to him that a German soldier coming toward him about one hundred meters away, fell. Sergei aimed at a motorcycle with two German soldiers a little further off, but his arms shook and the sight jiggled before his eyes. Finally he pulled the trigger and the motorcycle braked sharply, tipped to one side, and the Germans fell out. They began to shoot from a sub-machine-gun.

German artillery fired directly at Berezovka.

"Run to the next trench! Help the machine-gunners!" the lieutenant shouted to Sergei. "They have heavy losses."

Sergei raced to the next trench, and had just reached the first machine-gun when everything suddenly went black. He fell.

VI

"It's a good thing the shrapnel didn't hit the bone," the nurse said. She was middle-aged, short and chubby, with a kind face and lively, dark eyes. "He'll be fine."

"Where am I?" Sergei asked.

Irina peeked out from behind the nurse. "Lie quietly. You are home."

"How did I get here?"

"The important thing is that you are here," the nurse said. "You have a flesh wound in the hip. In a week or two you'll be running around like before."

She said good-bye and left quickly, hugging her medical bag to her side. The firing had intensified. There were probably many casualties.

Irina told Sergei what had happened. She brought the soldiers water during the battle, and had seen the lieutenant.

"Where do the Esenins live?" he had asked.

"You mean the Esins?"

"All right, the Esins. Who are you?"

"I'm Irina Esin."

"Come with me."

He had led her to the river bank and down into a small dugout. There she had seen Sergei lying on a waterproof cape.

"The nurse will go with you to bandage the wound," the lieutenant had said. "Leave quickly, while you are still in one piece."

Irina and the nurse had carried Sergei home.

"And I was unconscious the whole time?"

"Not at all! You cursed like a sailor," Irina reassured him.

"Strange. I don't remember a thing."

Taras appeared at the window.

"Can I come in?" To Sergei's surprise, he did not come over to the bed, but asked Irina what was wrong. She explained what had happened and only then did he approach Sergei.

"So the Nazis got you and me both."

"They'll pay for it!" Sergei said resolutely. "How is your mother?"

"Bad, real bad. And the medicine isn't helping," Taras said sorrowfully.

"She needs to see a good doctor," Irina said.

"Where are you going to find one now?"

"You're right."

Taras sat on the edge of Sergei's bed.

"Did you see the Nazis?"

"Yes, a lot of them. And I think I even killed one."

"Really? That's great."

"But I don't remember how I got wounded."

Deep inside he was happy about what had happened. He had participated in a battle and had been wounded. Fortunately, the nurse had said the wound wasn't serious and he would be back on his feet in no time.

"How are you feeling?" Sergei asked.

"Not very good," Taras admitted. "I can't lift my arm and it won't bend."

"You need to exercise it. Even if it hurts. Why don't you use a bucket of water. First fill it a third of the way and lift it. Then half. Then make it a full one. Do it every day and I'm sure your arm will be fine."

"I'll start now," Taras said. "Where is your bucket?"

Irina brought him one from the kitchen.

"I'm going to the well," Taras announced.

He was gone for a long time, and when he returned he looked very sad.

"What's the matter? Didn't it work?" Sergei asked.

"No, it worked fine and didn't even hurt. It's not that..."

"Well, what is it?"

"The Germans are advancing. Our soldiers have retreated to our side of the river."

"Let's go have a look," Sergei suggested.

"You can't get up," Irina said.

"Why not? That's stupid. I feel fine," Sergei retorted. He sat up, put his feet on the floor, and suddenly things swam before his eyes.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not a bit," the boy said jauntily, though he could hardly breathe for the pain.

From the doorway they could see a large portion of the river. There were occasional shots, explosions and machine-gun fire coming from various spots. The sky was filled with blue smoke.

"I guess I should go home to be with Mother," Taras said uncertainly. "She is in bad shape."

"I'll go with you," Irina said.

"What about me?" Sergei asked.

"Try to hop along with us," Irina said. "Maybe I'll go to the regional center, and you and Taras can stay with his mother."

When they arrived, Zoya Andreyevna was having trouble breathing. Her lips were blue.

"I'm going to the hospital," Irina said. "We can't let her go on like this." She hurried off.

Taras raised his mother's head higher and tried to make her more comfortable. Then he gave her some milk. She felt a little better after that, but soon began to cough again, and another attack came on. At one point she even lost consciousness.

"Do you have smelling salts?" Sergei shouted.

"We had some somewhere. I'll look."

A few minutes later Taras found them. Sergei held the open bottle under Zoya Andreyevna's nose. Her eyelids fluttered slightly, then she breathed slowly and deeply and opened her eyes.

"Thank you, son."

Irina returned three hours later and collapsed hopelessly in a chair.

"It's too late. The hospital is being evacuated. The doctors, nurses and wounded are about to leave on carts. They have no time for us."

"That's good," Zoya Andreyevna said quietly. "I don't want to go to a hospital."

Strangely enough, she felt better late that evening.

"God has answered my prayers," she said. For the first time that day she wanted to eat.

"Come outside!" Sergei shouted suddenly. "Something is going on out there."

Morose soldiers were walking past the house, and two trucks with weapons and supplies drove slowly behind them.

"Where are you going?" Sergei asked, hobbling to the road.

The soldiers walked on in silence. No one answered.

"Where is Lieutenant Temirov?" Sergei shouted. "Who knows where the lieutenant is?"

Again no one answered.

Sergei began to shout in despair: "Temirov! Comrade Temirov! Comrade..."

"The lieutenant isn't here. Don't bother looking," someone said from the dark. "He was wounded. They sent him to the medical unit."

"Where is that?"

"Who knows? The nurse took him in a cart."

That night no one slept. None of the children knew the Soviet units had retreated beyond Berezovka and had set up a new line of defense along the deep ravine which ran from the Dry River to the regional center.

The last to pass their house was the field kitchen.

"Where are the Nazis?" Sergei asked the middle-aged driver.

"Right now they're on the other bank," he explained. "But they'll probably be here by morning."

Soon the village looked as if it had been deserted. There was not a soul on the street—everyone was hiding in their homes.

"Maybe the Germans are waiting for reinforcements," Sergei said.

Irina and Taras did not answer. Zoya Andreyevna was also silent. At dawn she fell asleep.

The Germans did not enter the village until 9 a.m.

The children heard German being spoken outside. Everything seemed to happen as if in a fog. The highway, the village streets, the square and the small intersections were full of strange trucks, carts, tanks, motorcycles, and a hodge-podge of various guns. It was incomprehensible that such a drastic change could have taken place overnight.

A tense silence hung over Berezovka.

At midday, fresh units of enemy soldiers approached the village. There were many of them.

Sergei and Irina decided to stay at Taras' and not risk going home.

Late that afternoon an armored battalion entered the village.

Thus far, the Germans had not taken over homes, but had set up camp outside. The sinister quiet disturbed Sergei.

Two days passed in this manner, and the third was coming to a close, when a motorcycle with a sidecar stopped in front of Taras' house. The children raced to the window.

"It can't be," Taras whispered.

"What?" Sergei asked.

"Look!" Taras couldn't breathe from horror and shock.

A German with a sub-machine-gun slung over one shoulder leaped off the motorcycle and a man in civilian clothes with a bundle in one hand got out of the sidecar. Two Nazi officers approached him and said something.

Taras rushed over to his mother: "He is..."

The door opened and Gerasim Shulga entered.

"Hello! Weren't expecting me?"

A shocked silence fell.

"Or aren't you glad to see me?" Shulga asked, hurt.

"Excuse me, we'll be going," Sergei spoke first. "Irina..." Dragging his leg, he limped from the room. Irina followed.

"How are you?" Shulga asked coldly, going over to Zoya Andreyevna. "Still alive?"

"As you see," she said quietly. "Have they let you out for good? Your sentence isn't over yet."

"Not according to Soviet law, but it's over according to the German," he said maliciously.

Shulga had been in prison five years and had changed beyond recognition. He had aged—his thick beard had grown grey and his face was covered with wrinkles.

"You've grown up," he said to Taras, only now seeming to recognize him.

"Come here, son," Zoya Andreyevna said, adding sadly: "The Germans wounded him badly."

But Shulga seemed not to have heard her.

"Aren't you going to get up?" he asked his wife.

"I can't."

"What about you, son? Aren't you going to greet your father?" Shulga coldly rebuked Taras. "You could have kissed me. You probably don't think of me as your father anymore."

"Hello," Taras forced out.

"Who were those kids?"

"Our neighbor's children. Don't you remember?" Zoya Andreyevna said.

"Which neighbor?"

"The Esins. Their father is at the front and their mother was killed in a German bombing raid."

"So that was Sergei and Irina."

"Yes. I am eternally grateful to them for what they have done for me and Taras."

"Grateful to that man's brats," Shulga said nastily. "That's just like being grateful to the Soviet government."

"What did the Soviet government do to you?" Taras asked, upset.

"Shut up. You're still too young to be lecturing me."

Shulga hated Esin, and there was much that he would never forgive him for. It was Esin who first uncovered Shulga's crimes at the regional consumer association. It was Esin and Shakhov who had reported Shulga to the Regional Party Committee, and from there the prosecutor had taken over. It was Esin and Shakhov who had testified against him in court. While there had been other witnesses, those two were the main ones. And even earlier, before his crimes at the consumer association came to light, Shulga had been excluded from membership in the collective farm at Shakhov's insistence, and Esin had been the first to vote in favor.

He now recalled the shameful incident that occurred just before he left the village.

They were having a general meeting of the collective farm members, and were discussing expelling Shulga from the farm, since he constantly shirked his work, engaged in profiteering, drank, insulted everyone, and had even threatened the team leader with a knife on several occasions. Many people openly spoke of his dissipated life, and Esin, the head agronomist and secretary of the collective farm Party organization, was one of them. Before he began, he asked Shulga who his father was. Shulga looked at him sullenly, and answered in annoyance: "You know who my father was, why ask?" Esin then told those gathered that Shulga's father had fought against collectivization, killed the chairman of the village Soviet, and had been executed. "You have followed in your father's footsteps," he said angrily, turning to Shulga. "Exclude him from the collective farm," people began to shout. Shakhov, who was presiding, finally managed to calm the crowd, and gave Shulga the floor. "I'll get along fine without your collective farm!" he yelled, not deigning to stand. Then he rose and left the room. That day he disappeared from the village, and no one heard any more about him for a while. Several years later he got work as a driver at the consumer association warehouse. Within four months, he was found with stolen goods and arrested.

That night Zoya Andreyevna felt worse. Taras woke and ran to his mother. Shulga slept soundly. When Taras asked him to help, he only cursed angrily.

Three days later Shulga was taken somewhere by a German soldier who came for him. He soon returned home, gay and proud. He smelled strongly of alcohol.

Taras ran to the Esins', depressed and upset.

"What happened?" Sergei asked.

"You see ... my father... He's been named village headman. The Germans... They let him out of jail."

"What can we do?"

"I don't know," Taras said. He was crushed, and trembled all over.

VII

The partisan commander received important information from Fedotov. At the beginning of September, the Soviet forces were to begin a counteroffensive. The Western Front, according to the plan from General Headquarters, would begin the attack along the line northeast of Smolensk, defeat the enemy forces and with the troops of the Reserve Front, reach the Velizh—Demidov—Smolensk line by September 8. The Reserve Front was ordered to continue building fortifications along the Ostashkov — Selizharovo — Olenino — Dnieper — Spas-Demensk —Kirov line, while its two left flank armies were to go on the offensive, crush the enemy forces occupying Elnya, liberate the town and continue to Pochinsk and Roslavl. The Bryansk Front was to begin its offensive September 2, destroy enemy forces in the Pechen-Surazh area, and reach the Petrovich—Osmolovichi—Belaya Dubrava—Guta—Koretskaya line. The success of these moves would change the situation on the Western line and disrupt the enemy's offensive against the Central Front.

It was at this time that the partisans were to strike several significant blows to the enemy from the rear.

Shakhov called the group commanders together in his dugout, and asked them to state their opinions. Ivan Ivanovich was the first to speak:

"I suggest the following: as we all know, the Nazis have captured our regional center and are now doing everything to strengthen their hold on it. This is understandable since the railroad station is there, and most roads intersect in the town. If we..."

The regional center was called Durasovo. At the beginning of the 19th century, a large estate and village stood where the town is now located. Today no one remembers the name of the village, or the owner of the estate. We only know he was despotic and mercilessly exploited his many serfs.

As a result, the serfs revolted, and the revolt was led by a young

peasant by the name of Durasov. The peasants killed the landlord, his family and the estate manager, and occupied the estate. Durasov was put in charge. He governed the village for over three weeks, until the tsarist troops arrived to suppress the revolt. No one knows what happened to the young leader, but from that time on, the place has been called Durasovo.

Shakhov liked Ivan Ivanovich's idea.

"It's true, the enemy hasn't had time to really settle in. That is the first point. The second, and no less important, is that one can approach Durasovo from the forest. That is crucial. Finally, we will be able to raid the garrison and destroy the trains at the station. How many people would such an operation require, Ivan Ivanovich?"

"No less than fifty."

"That's too many. We only have two hundred in the entire detachment, and we have several simultaneous operations ahead of us."

"The less people, the harder it will be. There is the station, don't forget," Ivan Ivanovich insisted.

They settled on forty.

The men then went on to discuss plans for two more operations—one on the highway leading to Berezovka, where there was a great deal of movement of enemy troops and equipment. The second was to take place in the village of Ignatovka where the Nazis had organized a prisoner-of-war camp.

All three operations were set for the same day—September 1.

It was decided that the Durasovo operation would be carried out by a group of cavalrymen. Ivan Ivanovich wanted to participate.

"I'm an old cavalryman myself. It's right up my alley," he explained.

"But you are no longer a young man," Shakhov tried to talk him out of it.

"Maybe not, but I'm going anyway. It was my idea and I'm going to carry it out," the old teacher answered.

At dawn on September 1, a group of forty cavalrymen moved through the forest to the regional center.

It was a little over twenty-five kilometers to Durasovo. The first fifteen they passed without incident, but then the unexpected occurred. A German pack train was moving along a dirt road running through the forest, which, by all reports, should have been empty.

The partisans dismounted and hid.

The train was rather long. Ivan Ivanovich counted forty carts,

and the end was still not in sight. An attack was out of the question.

The train was guarded by several motorcyclists and two small tanks, one at the beginning of the column and one at the end. It appeared the partisans would have to change their route since the train seemed to be heading for Durasovo.

"Maybe it would be better to wait a bit," Ivan Ivanovich suggested to Group Commander Meshkov.

"We'll lose time," the latter answered.

"Better to lose time than lives. Don't you agree?"

"All right. I'll trust your experience," the commander reluctantly agreed.

"There is a second possibility," Ivan Ivanovich said. "We could go to the left. There are marshes there, but they should be dry by now. From there we could head for Malkovo, turn toward Zagorye, and be in the forest again. It's not far from there to Durasovo."

"What if there are large garrisons of Germans in Malkovo and Zagorye?"

"We could send someone on reconnaissance."

"But that would take time."

"You are right. It is better not to risk it. This road leads straight to Durasovo."

The partisans retreated into the woods and stopped in a large clearing with raspberry bushes growing along the edge. They left two soldiers near the road, in order to know when the German supply train had passed.

An hour and a half passed.

Suddenly they heard sounds coming from the road.

"I'll go have a look," the group commander said.

He soon returned, excited. "Three men come with me."

There were more than enough volunteers, and the commander quickly chose three.

"Hurry. And have your grenades ready just in case."

Everyone listened tensely to what was happening on the road. Finally they heard a short exchange of fire and an explosion, then everything fell silent. The partisans soon returned with booty.

"Look! Two officers, an aide, a driver and a packet of papers," the group commander said as he took maps and documents out of two map-cases.

"And there is the car. By the way, we'll need to drive it into the forest. We can pick it up on the way back. It's a new Mercedes Benz. Should come in handy."

They soon moved on and reached Durasovo at noon. There was no one at the edge of the town nearest the forest.

"The attack must be lightning fast," Meshkov said to his com-

rades. "That way, the Germans won't have time to collect their wits. One group to the center, and the other to the station. All of you with incendiary bottles to the station."

Meshkov named Ivan Ivanovich leader of the second group which was to take the station. At Meshkov's command the partisans raced from the forest to the village.

Three confused, unarmed Germans ran from the first house, and were cut down. The partisans met the first resistance on the main street when two light machine-guns began firing from around a corner. Meshkov threw a hand grenade, and the firing stopped.

The German commandant's office was on the square guarded by machine-guns on the sides and two light guns, but the partisans took care of those quickly.

"To the station," the commander shouted to Ivan Ivanovich, and the latter left with his group, hurrying to the right along a quiet, poplar-lined street.

The station came into view, and Ivan Ivanovich realized immediately that the attack would not be easy—there were at least one hundred enemy soldiers on the square in front of the station.

The partisans, opening fire, poured onto the square and fought their way to the platform and the tracks from two sides. There was a train with gasoline tanks near the station and a passenger-freight train a little further on. Grenades and incendiary bottles flew at the tanks and into the cars, and a packet of three grenades was tossed at the engine. The Germans rushed about the station frantically as sub-machine-gun fire cut them down.

In what seemed like less than five minutes, everything grew quiet. The two trains blazed smokily.

"Back to the woods!" Ivan Ivanovich shouted.

Distant shots and explosions could be heard coming from the town—obviously Meshkov's group had also done their job.

Ivan Ivanovich led his partisans to a nearby field, and then into the forest. Meshkov's group was already there.

"Any casualties?" the commander asked. "We have three dead and two slightly wounded."

"We lost no one," Ivan Ivanovich said after looking over his men. "And apparently no wounded. Amazing!"

"We had no time to get their bodies," Meshkov said sadly. "Petrovichev, Kudasov, Solonitsyn. May they rest in peace."

Two hours later they reached the camp. Late that afternoon the other groups returned from their assignments.

"We have a present for you, Shakhov," Meshkov said. "The keys to a car and the car itself. Now you can ride in style."

"I'm happy for you, old buddy, and I envy you, too," Grandpa

Misha told Ivan Ivanovich. "They won't let me go on assignments. All I can do is work in a makeshift smithy, repairing weapons and ammunition."

On September 10, Shakhov called everyone together.

"We did an excellent job on September 1st," he said. "I want to pass along the thanks of the underground Regional Party Committee and the Red Army Command. And now news from the front. The 16th Army forced a crossing at the Vop River, and struck the enemy a stunning blow at Dukhovshchina. The enemy lost almost 130 tanks, over 100 trucks, and a great deal of ammunition, guns and men. The 24th Army broke the enemy's defense at Elnya, forced him to the west thus eliminating the Elnya salient and liberating the town. Troops of the Western Front have forced the invaders to spread themselves along a huge line of defense, stretching from Velikiye Luki to Mozyr. The Germans suffered great losses at Rogachevo, Zhlobino and Yartsevo."

The Red Army's counter-offensive in the beginning of September took the enemy completely by surprise.

VIII

His father's return had a devastating effect on Taras. He had not returned a man intending to do good, or a defender in troubled times, or a repentant sinner, but a traitor to his country, and one of the Germans' lackies.

What did that make Taras? The son of a traitor? How would he look his friends and neighbors in the eye, particularly Sergei and Irina, who were his best friends. Taras did not go outside, since he was afraid of meeting someone. It had been a week since he had seen Sergei and Irina, and Irina's reproachful words still rang in his ears: "What does that make you, Taras?" The others in the village might ask the same question and what could he say? His mother was also in despair. She had expected anything but this. "What have we done to deserve such punishment?" she asked her son.

Since it was impossible to mope in front of his mother, he would run to the shed, climb up on the hay, and try to push everything out of his mind, as if all of this was just a terrible dream.

During one of those times when Taras was hiding in the shed thinking his black thoughts, he suddenly remembered Ivan Ivanovich's words: "A son is not responsible for his father's actions." He felt a little better. "But where is Ivan Ivanovich? If only he

were here and I could talk to him, but he's in the forest with the partisans. I'd never find him."

Suddenly he heard his father shouting, and Taras reluctantly left the shed. Shulga, with his hat pulled down to his eyebrows, was headed out the gate and shouted as he went:

"Get the back room fixed up and put your mother there. Then clean up the house. We're going to have important visitors this evening."

Taras did not answer. After standing uncertainly for a moment, not knowing what to do, he decided to go see Sergei.

Sergei and Irina greeted him half-heartedly. Sergei was looking at a magazine and Irina was sewing.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come?" Taras said.

"Why not? Sit down," Sergei said, not looking at him.

"I need your advice."

"What about?" Inside Sergei was full of doubts. No matter how much he liked Taras, the appearance of Shulga, who had been made headman, was like a barrier between him and his friend. He didn't even want to see Taras. But was he being fair? After all, it wasn't his friend's fault. And that wasn't the only thing. Their own future depended on Taras' father. He could try to get even with them for being the children of a Communist and grandchildren of a partisan. Maybe it would be better to use Taras and his father to help the cause.

"Some high-placed people are coming to see my father this evening," Taras said. "Do you think I should put something in their food and poison them?"

"Have you gone crazy?" Sergei shouted.

"Why do you say that? It would also be a way of getting even with my father."

"It'll be the end of you, and others as well," Sergei said, firmly opposed. "Is that how real soldiers behave? You need patience and self-control. You should weigh the pros and cons before you begin to act."

"I think Sergei is right," Irina said. "Maybe I don't understand everything, but it seems to me that your father can help us."

"How?"

"We'll have to think about that," Sergei said evasively. "For now, put your mother in the back room, farther from the strangers. Then get things ready, and wait for the guests. Irina will help you."

"Me!" Irina gasped.

"Yes, you, and don't argue," Sergei continued. "We need to see who comes and find out what they talk about. It could be important."

"You think so?" Taras said uncertainly, but already feeling better.

"I'm sure," Sergei said. "Let's get started."

Taras headed out the door.

"I'll be over soon," Irina promised.

Taras' father wasn't home when he got there. He did not want to worry his mother, so he did not say anything to her just yet.

His father returned a little later.

"Why isn't everything ready?"

"I'm sorry for Mama. How can you do this to her? She is very sick."

"You've grown up to be a real sniveler," Shulga laughed.

Taras went to fix up the room for his mother. When everything was ready, he went over to her.

"Mama, I'm going to move you to the back room. You'll be more comfortable there. It's quieter and ... farther away from him."

First he took the pillows and bed clothes, and then helped his mother to stand.

"Be careful."

"Don't worry, son. I'm fine."

When she was settled, Taras straightened up the now empty room, moved the table to the middle, and placed chairs and stools around. Irina came in.

"Tell me what to do."

"My father will tell us. For now, we'll set the table."

"Did you find out about the guests?" Irina asked.

"Not yet. I didn't have time. And I thought..."

"Fool!" Irina said angrily. "If he had found out who was going to be here we could have asked Fedotov's advice," she thought. "He would have told us what to pay attention to."

"What if the guests are Nazis?" Taras asked.

"That's even better!" Irina said. "Don't you understand?"

They set the table and brought two buckets of water from the well. Evening fell. After the hot summer, mid-September was cold and damp. It rained frequently and for long stretches at a time. Just before seven, Taras' father appeared with a pretty, young woman. Seeing that his orders had been carried out, he cheered up.

"Everything ready? Good! Now you two go outside and Maria and I will... Maria will fix supper."

He had known Maria for a long time, ever since he had begun to work for the consumer association. She was the favorite daughter of the warehouse manager, Prokhorov, a swindler and a drunk. He and Shulga had hit it off immediately, and soon the latter's

eye had fallen on Maria. Quiet, modest, pretty Maria pleased him more and more. When she began working as a hairdresser after graduating from school, Shulga started seeing her. He declared his love, told her he was lonely, and that he dreamed of uniting their lives.

Maria was flattered by the attentions of an older man like Shulga, but she was in no hurry to marry. They went out more and more frequently, and then Shulga began to spend nights at her house. Prokhorov either did not notice their relationship, or was too dependent on Shulga to say anything. He only procured the goods. It was Shulga who sold them and split the money with him.

Maria grew accustomed to her position as unofficial wife, and then came the trial and Shulga was sent to prison. Apparently, Maria truly believed he was innocent, and took his packages from her father, who was grateful to Shulga for not giving him away.

When the Nazis freed him, Shulga went straight to Prokhorov. He and his daughter who had aged, greeted Shulga with open arms. He had lived with them for a week, until he was named headman of Berezovka.

Taras' father did not even look in on his wife, and so Taras demonstratively went to his mother's room. Irina went outside.

"Who is there?" Zoya Andreyevna asked.

"Father and some..." Taras did not know what to say.

"A woman?" his mother asked, not very surprised. "I thought so. That's why he wanted me back here. Out of sight."

"Mama, don't get upset," Taras said.

"I'm not," his mother responded, wiping her eyes. "You go outside. Was that Irina I heard?"

"Yes."

"I like that girl," Zoya Andreyevna said. "She is pretty, a hard worker, and very attentive."

When Taras opened the door to the next room, he interrupted his father and Maria in an embrace.

"What are you doing here?" Shulga shouted angrily, leaping up from the couch.

Taras hurried outside.

It was growing dark. A chilly breeze blew in from the west, and the sky was filled with black clouds. Crows cawed noisily in the old willow trees. The delicious smell of something cooking came from the house.

"What are they fixing in there?" Taras asked.

"It smells like suckling pig," Irina said. "Or am I imagining things?"

"It could be," Taras said indifferently.

Irina fell silent. She was thinking. Finally she spoke up:

"Taras, I'm going, but I'll be back soon. Meanwhile, you find out about the guests."

"All right," he promised.

Irina raced home.

"Sergei!" she shouted, before she got to the door. "We have work to do."

"What kind?"

"Let's go to Fedotov and ask his advice. We'll tell him some high-placed people are going to be at Shulga's, though we don't know who. He'll tell us what to do."

"You're right," Sergei said. "Let's go."

On the way, they continually ran into Germans bustling about trucks and carts. When they got to Fedotov's house they knocked, but no one answered. They pushed at the door, but it was locked.

"Strange," Sergei said, and looked at Irina in bewilderment.

"Let's go to Martynov's," Irina suggested. "Remember that driver who was at Fedotov's. He should be home. His wife just had a baby."

"Let's go."

Martynov himself opened the door, and they told him why they had come.

"Don't worry about Fedotov. He'll be back in two days. And that is an excellent idea to find out about Shulga's guests. Of course, it's important to know what they talk about. If the guests are Germans, pay attention to what kind of mood they're in. You probably know the Red Army has been shaking them up lately. I think Fedotov would have told you about the same thing if he were here."

Sergei and Irina headed back. Just before they reached their street, Irina stopped:

"You go home, and I'll go to Taras'."

It was already dark when a black car pulled up in front of Shulga's. Two well-dressed men got out. One was head of the gendarmerie, Oberlieutenant Klaus, and the other was Ebert, the commander of a punitive brigade. Shulga met them at the gate.

Kudimov, the former German teacher who was now a member of the police, ran over, and bowing and scraping before the guests, said something in German.

"He wasn't a groveler at school," Irina thought. "He was always very dignified. Now look at him, it's disgusting."

The guests were apparently very hungry, for they began to eat as soon as they sat down. They resembled crows falling on carrion.

Shulga poured himself some vodka, and then filled his guests' glasses. The first toast was to the Fuehrer's invincible army. The second to the victory of the Fuehrer's troops on the Eastern Front. Then they began to drink to one another's health. Soon the entire roast pig Shulga killed especially for the occasion was gone.

Shulga curried favor with the Germans in any way he could, and after a few more drinks, he wound up the gramophone.

"Not those records," Kudimov said, translating what Oberlieutenant Klaus had said, and ran outside to the car. In a few minutes he was back with others.

Klaus and Commander Ebert put the records on themselves, and a German march filled the room. The guests pushed back the table and began to dance. Tall, lean Klaus, who had an unpleasant, lined face, walked over to Maria.

"Bitte, Frau."

Small, fat Ebert watched the dancers with his beady eyes through glasses which had slid down his nose. Shulga and Kudimov chatted aimlessly.

One record followed another, and Klaus continued to dance with Maria. He whispered something in her ear and Taras, who was listening at the door, realized that the German officer knew Russian and apparently kept Kudimov as an interpreter for appearances.

"And now I'd like to drink to my savior, Oberlieutenant Klaus," Shulga said drunkenly, rising with a glass in his hand. "He released me from prison. He saw I had potential, and named me headman, and I will be grateful to..."

"Enough, enough," Klaus cut him off in broken Russian. "Let's drink."

Maria brought in a cake.

"Please help yourselves. I baked it."

Soon there was nothing left but crumbs.

Klaus looked around the room, and bent toward Shulga.

"Tomorrow we will begin what we talked about. I want a list of Communists, Jews, and all the village activists. Find reliable people to help you. I know you know a lot about the villagers, but..."

"Give us the names and we'll send them where they belong," Ebert added.

"I understand, and am ready to be of service," Shulga promised. "Everything will be fine."

"Let's have one for the road, as you say here," Klaus suggested.

Everyone clinked glasses and drank. Then Shulga saw his guests to their car. Taras also went outside.

"Where have you been?" his father asked sternly.

"With Mother."

Shulga went back inside, but Taras waited until Irina came. He told her all he had heard.

"Good for you! That is very important."

IX

That night the Esin children did not sleep. Around three in the morning they set out for the partisan camp. At least this time they knew the way.

Martynov had been right. It was necessary to tell Shakhov everything they had learned from Taras. Martynov had said, Fedotov was with the partisans, as well as Kolesov, the secretary of the underground Regional Party Committee.

Despite the late hour, Germans still roamed the village. So far, they had been quiet, and had done nothing brutal, but there was something frightening in their behavior. They watched everything, as if checking out the situation before making their move. Now they watched Irina and Sergei, though no one stopped them or asked them where they were going.

Once out of the village the children relaxed. The road was almost deserted except for only an occasional car or cart.

Martynov had given them a new password. It was *misfire*, and the response was *not the first*.

The woods began, and for the first time they saw how the war had damaged it. Many trees had been destroyed by shells and their trunks bore the signs of shrapnel and bullets. There were endless shell-holes and places where the earth had been churned up by explosives.

"Even the forest suffers from war," Irina thought. "You know, maybe it's a good thing Taras' father is headman," she said aloud.

"Maybe."

It was cold and damp in the forest. The ground was covered with wet leaves and spider webs clung to the children's faces. There were no more berries, but there were a lot of mushrooms. However, Sergei and Irina paid no attention. Finally, someone called to them.

"Misfire!" Sergei yelled.

"Not the first. Go ahead."

The same was repeated about two hundred meters further. Soon they reached the partisan camp. Shakhov was giving a summary of operations, and they were told they would have to wait. Finally, he came out of the dugout with Fedotov and another man in glasses.

"These are our young heroes," Shakhov said to the stranger.

"I've heard of them," he replied. "Esin would have kids like these."

"This is Kolesov, secretary of the Regional Party Committee," Shakhov said. "So tell me about your urgent business."

Sergei began to explain. No one interrupted him while he spoke.

"Interesting," Fedotov said, when he had finished. "First, it is important that we know there is a gendarmerie and punitive brigade in Berezovka. Second, we will have to save the people on Shulga's list."

"I think you should return immediately with the children," Shakhov told Fedotov. "Think about how we can get hold of that list. Maybe you can help," he added, turning to the children.

"We'll try," Sergei promised. "Maybe through Taras."

"Then let's get you something to eat and send you on your way," Shakhov said. "Come with me."

They entered a rather cramped dugout with a small table and a bed made up on straw in the corner.

"How are Grandpa and Ivan Ivanovich?" Sergei asked.

"We'll call your grandfather, but you'll have to go see Ivan Ivanovich yourselves. He came down with malaria," Shakhov explained. "Tell Esin to come here."

In a few minutes Grandpa Misha appeared, looking younger and thinner, and dressed in a light, tarpaulin apron.

"Look who's here!" he exclaimed, and hugged them both.

"You can be very proud of your grandchildren," Shakhov said. "This is the second time they've carried out a military assignment. Actually, the third."

"I'm the only one without an assignment," Grandpa Misha complained.

"Don't be so upset. We've just begun."

The children ate, and then left with their grandfather for the medical dugout. It was spacious, with two rows of cots. Ivan Ivanovich was in the far corner.

"Your students have come to see you, my friend," Grandpa Misha told him. "I've heard they are heroes."

Ivan Ivanovich, his cheeks sunken and yellowish, embraced the children.

"Sergei, Irina!"

Time flew by, and soon Fedotov appeared.

"We should be going," he said, adjusting a German sub-machine-gun on his shoulder. Sergei and Irina had never seen him armed.

"This is just for the road," he said, seeing their surprise. "I have no weapons at home. It's too dangerous."

X

The children did not tell Taras about their trip to the camp. Just in case.

"I hate him. I can't stand to look at him," Taras complained to Sergei and Irina the next day. "He embraces that hairdresser in front of Mama! I'd like to strangle him."

"Calm down, calm down," Sergei said firmly. "Your father may come in handy. Remember what you told us about that list?"

"Yes, what about it? He hasn't made it yet."

"How do you know?"

"I just know."

"That's even better. Think of how to steal it when he has finished it," Sergei said. "Better yet, how to copy it, since then they wouldn't notice. Do you think you could do it?"

"I don't know. I'd have to think about how."

"Well, think. You have it till evening, then come tell me. I'll be waiting."

Taras walked home slowly.

"Let's go for a swim," Sergei said to his sister.

"O.K.," Irina agreed. "I don't want to, but I'll keep you company on the bank."

They went down to the river, but the Germans were washing their horses on the bank. They went further upstream, but there were Germans there too, washing their cars.

"We can't even swim because of those Nazis," Sergei grumbled. "Let's try another place."

They finally found an empty spot under some willows.

"Come on in," Sergei urged.

"No, I don't feel like it. I'll just sit here."

Sergei undressed and dove in.

"It's freezing!"

"I told you..."

Sergei washed, and then swam to the middle of the river.

"Don't go too far! Your wound hasn't healed completely!" Irina shouted, but Sergei did not seem to have heard. He was already nearing the opposite shore. Irina watched as he stood up and slowly came out of the water. On a steep rise above the river, Sergei suddenly stopped and stared at something. Ten minutes passed, but he remained standing on the bank, and looking down at his feet. Finally he turned, waved to Irina, and began to swim back. He was silent and depressed when he reached her.

"What happened?" she asked.

"The entrenchments I helped Lieutenant Temirov and the soldiers dig are over there. They're all churned up. A lot of men must have been killed."

They returned home quiet and thoughtful. Taras was already waiting for them.

"I have an idea, but I need sleeping pills."

"What kind of sleeping pills?" Sergei asked, completely in the dark.

"Any kind, as long as they're strong. So my father and that Maria will sleep soundly."

"Why?"

"Listen carefully," Taras interrupted impatiently. "When I got home, Kudimov was there. He and my father were sitting at the table drawing up that list. From what they said, my father is supposed to give it to Klaus tomorrow morning. If my father and Maria are drugged, I can copy the list tonight."

"Good idea, but where can we get the drugs?" Sergei asked.

"Maybe from Matvei Semyonovich, the doctor's assistant," Irina suggested.

"Right! Let's go see him."

The doctor's assistant lived in the third house from the burned school.

"Matvei Semyonovich, could we talk to you?" Sergei called, as he knocked at the window.

The assistant's face appeared at the window, and then he opened the door.

"Come in, come in. What's happened now?"

"Nothing has happened," Sergei said. "We just need sleeping medication. Do you have some?"

"Sleeping medication, you say?" Matvei Semyonovich thought for a minute. "I have some chloral hydrate, but I don't know what it will do to people. It's for animals."

"We need it for animals," Taras exclaimed.

"Wait a minute, I'll look," the doctor's assistant sad, and went over to a cupboard with a blue cross, which was hanging on the wall. "It was somewhere here..." He went through all kinds of bottles and packets until he found a white box. "This is it."

"What is the dose?" Sergei asked.

"If it's for a cow, then give it half a box. For a sheep, you need a quarter of a box."

"We need it for a cow," Taras said.

"Don't listen to him. We need it for a sheep, Sergei said.

"Just be very careful."

"What are you going to mix it in?" Sergei asked when they were outside.

"He drinks vodka with that hairdresser every evening," Taras explained. "Vodka and tea! Can you imagine? And I make the tea. After they have a few drinks, I'll slip it in."

"Just be careful. You could get caught and ruin everything."

"I'll do anything to get my father. I hate him. I hate him," Taras said venomously.

"How is your mother?" Irina asked.

"She's upset, but her heart seems better. I don't know why. Why don't you come see her?"

"Later," Sergei promised. "Right now it's better not to arouse suspicion."

"I'll go," Irina said. "Actually, it will be better that way. It also looks funny if we visited all the time and suddenly stopped. You're right, we both don't need to go, but I can."

Shulga was not home. Maria, like a zealous housewife, was working in the garden.

"Did you give my mother lunch?" Taras asked coldly.

"What do you think I am, a servant?" Maria asked. "She should get up and fix her own meals."

His mother was reading *Tom Sawyer*.

"Irina, Taras!" she was overjoyed. "I thought you'd never come."

"You hungry?"

"Well, I don't know..."

"I'll fix you something," Irina said. "While it's cooking I'll go get some milk from Matrena."

Soon everything was ready. Irina said good-bye and almost ran into Shulga as she went out the door.

Taras was at their house at the crack of dawn.

"I did it. Here," he said, and held out the list to Sergei.

"You copied it?"

"Yes."

"What about your father and Maria?"

"They're still asleep."

"Are you sure that drug didn't kill them?"

"Don't be silly. I listened. They're snoring, which means they are alive."

"Thanks, Taras. This is very important," Sergei said. The last traces of hostility toward his friend vanished.

As soon as Taras left, Sergei and Irina hurried to Fedotov's.

"You managed to get the list?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes, and everything is fine."

"Let me see it."

Sergei handed him the list.

"Seventeen names," Fedotov said, slowly studying the list. "Fools. This is ridiculous, even for the likes of them."

Shots and the barking of dogs were heard.

"Stay here," Fedotov said, and hurried outside.

Soon everything calmed down and Fedotov returned.

"False alarm. The Germans are enjoying themselves. They've set up a shooting gallery." He again looked over the list. "You have done a very important thing, and have saved many good people's lives. I'll give this to Nikolayev today, and we'll decide what to do."

"Who is Nikolayev?" Irina asked.

"One of us. He has been named the commissar in Shakhov's detachment. He's going there today, so he'll take this with him. He can discuss it with Kolesov and Shakhov."

"Actually, we didn't do this," Sergei admitted. "Taras did it all. He is Gerasim Shulga's son."

"Give him my thanks."

"Maybe it's better not to."

"Why?"

"Well, after all, he is the son of a traitor. We don't tell him everything," Sergei said. "He hates his father, so we give him assignments. But we don't explain, just in case."

"Perhaps you are right," Fedotov agreed. "We all must be extremely careful. You can do a great deal, but if they begin to suspect you, it is the end of everything. Do you understand that?"

"Of course, we understand," Sergei said.

The children went home.

"Sergei, I am real tired. I think I'll lay down," Irina said. She fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Sergei sat next to her. She tossed and turned in her sleep, muttering to herself and throwing off her blanket. He tried to make her more comfortable.

Irina was having a nightmare. A Nazi in a helmet was trying to choke her with his long fingers. "You have been sentenced to death for writing the word *traitor*," he said. Irina bit his hand and struggled. "Who sentenced me?" she kept asking. The Nazi grimaced, and clicked his terrible, tiger-like teeth. "You have been sentenced on orders from the Fuehrer!" He gripped Irina's throat in his hands. She tried to shout but could not. Finally, she managed to yell "Grandpa!" On hearing her cry, Grandpa Misha ran to help, but he could not reach her. The Nazi's grip tightened. But Irina managed to pull away, and bit his hand as hard as she could. The Nazi let go of her and howled in pain. Irina woke up.

"Irina, Irina, it's all right. Don't be afraid. I'm here," Sergei said, trying to comfort her.

She was trembling all over. Sergei gave her a glass of water, and tried to raise her head. That didn't help.

"Open your eyes, Irina. Don't be afraid." He took her hand, and clasped her head to his chest. He held her until she calmed down. Then she told him about her dream.

"I think it means something good will happen," she concluded.

Sergei thought for a while.

"Irina," he whispered. "From now on we are in danger every minute of every day. We have to be constantly ready to meet that danger." He fell silent for a moment and then continued: "I wouldn't be surprised if after what happened they'll start following us. There may be traitors around who will tell Shulga or Kudimov. That is why we have to think about everything we do. We must be very careful. Very."

Someone knocked softly at the window.

"Who's there? Come in."

Slava Kotov, a boy about four years younger than Sergei, appeared.

"What do you want, Slava?

"I was going past Taras' house, and saw a poster hanging on the door that says *Traitor*. Well, it's not a poster exactly, just a piece of paper, but you can read it from far away. Maybe it's right to hang it there, since Taras' father is the headman, but I'm afraid. The Germans might find out who did it and shoot him."

"Did you tear it off?"

"No, I..."

"Come on, Slava. Irina, you wait here!"

The two boys ran over to Taras' house. No one was around, and Sergei saw the paper immediately. He crept up to the door, ripped it off and crumpled it. "Where is Taras?" he wondered.

"Thanks, Slava. Don't tell anyone about this."

"I won't."

Sergei glanced in the window. No one home. He went to Zoya Andreyevna's room.

"Good morning. Is Taras around?"

"He ran off somewhere about an hour ago," she explained. "He should be back soon."

But Taras had still not come home by late afternoon. Sergei and Irina combed the village, but there was no sign of him. They did what they could to reassure his mother, and went out to look for him again later, without success.

Shulga and Maria came home that evening with Kudimov. They

sat down to supper, and as usual, began by drinking. Taras' absence did not seem to bother them in the least.

Sergei and Irina were extremely worried.

"That means he wrote that sign, and ran away," Sergei decided. "But where? I can understand why he ran. He's afraid of his father. But where could he go?"

Later that night, though rather tipsy, even Shulga kept walking over to the window.

"Stop worrying," Maria told him. "Nothing's happened to your brat. He's probably gone to friends or somewhere."

"You blind, woman? His friends are hovering around here," Shulga said. "I don't like those Esins, but it's nice that they're running all over to find my son."

Kudimov left at midnight and Shulga and Maria went to bed, after drinking another glass of schnapps. Irina stayed with Taras' mother, while Sergei kept scouring the village.

It was already beginning to get light when he sat down to rest on a fallen tree along the river bank. It was chilly, and he huddled up against the cold. There were no Germans around now. The only people still outside were two guards in front of the houses where Klaus and Ebert were living.

Sergei was sleepy, and he cursed Taras for keeping him up all night and for doing such a careless thing. He could see the highway and the forest through the morning mist. Suddenly he sat up. A small, lone figure had appeared on the road leading from the forest. Could it be Taras? The figure neared and there was no longer any doubt. Sergei ran to meet him.

"Taras!"

Taras seemed surprised and stopped.

"Where have you been?"

Taras did not answer.

"Were you the one who pasted that paper with the word *traitor* on your door?"

"It was me. So what? He *is* a traitor."

"And you are a fool," Sergei was ready to give Taras a thrashing. "Where were you, I said."

Taras hesitated.

"I went to find the partisans," he said finally.

"You're an even bigger fool than I thought. Well, did you find them?"

"No."

"And you won't," Sergei said nastily.

"I got lost."

"You can thank us for ripping your foolish sign off," Sergei said. "Do you realize what would have happened if your father

had seen that? We would all have been in serious trouble."

"Why all of us?"

"Especially you."

"That's why I left."

"But you came back. And did you think about anybody else? I don't want to talk about it anymore. Come with me."

Taras unquestionably obeyed Sergei. They went to the Esins' house.

"Wait a minute," Sergei said, and disappeared inside. He was soon back with an empty basket.

"Take this. Tell everyone you went to the forest to gather mushrooms, and got lost. You barely managed to find the way home and that's why you don't have any mushrooms. Got it?"

"Yes," Taras muttered.

Shulga and Maria were asleep, so Sergei and Taras quietly tiptoed to Zoya Andreyevna's room.

Taras told her just what Sergei had said. Both his mother and Irina cried from happiness.

XI

Twice a week Maria went to the regional center to visit her brother, and spent the night there.

Shulga did not like these trips. He was very attached to Maria, and languished without her. As far as Zoya Andreyevna was concerned, he secretly wished she would hurry and die. Though Maria also drank a great deal, Shulga controlled himself and drank less when she was around. When she was gone he lost his head completely, and got so drunk that he even began to hate himself. Still he could not stop.

That day, as usual, he tried to convince her to stay.

"Don't go, I beg you. Don't leave me alone."

"What are you whining for? I'll be back tomorrow around lunch time. By the way, I'll pick up the provisions from Durasovo."

"I'll starve again," Shulga said.

"Why should you starve? Tell Irina to fix your meals. She does it for your little wife, so she can do it for you too." With that, Maria left.

Shulga sat for a long time with a blank look. Then he put on his hat and coat, and went outside. There he met Kudimov.

"I was on my way to see you," Kudimov said. "We have to talk."

"Let's go to your place," Shulga suggested. "I can t sit at home with Maria gone. I'm sick of everything, and those kids are forever running around. Do you have anything to drink?"

"I've always got something," Kudimov said. "Ebert gives me part of his supplies."

Kudimov did not live in his own house. The owner, from whom he had rented a room before the war, had been evacuated, and Kudimov had taken over the house even before the Germans arrived. His wife, from whom he was divorced, lived in his house.

"Sit down, Gerasim," Kudimov said after they entered a small, well-lit room. He got a bottle with a German label and something to eat—pickles, cabbage, onions and a half-a-loaf of black bread—and put it on the table.

"Why are you so down?" he asked Gerasim.

"I don't like Maria to leave. All kinds of thoughts come into my head."

"She'll be back, don't worry."

"Anything might happen. She's still young."

"She could start messing around with the Germans."

"Klaus has had his eye on her for a long time," Shulga complained. "I specially brought him a woman from Durasovo. She's younger and prettier than Maria. Maybe now he'll leave her alone."

"Did you give the Oberlieutenant the list?"

"Yes. Why?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Kudimov said. "We shouldn't have hurried with that list."

"What do you mean?"

"The situation is complicated," Kudimov began to explain in a rather confused manner. "Everything isn't happening as the Germans wanted. They bragged about taking Moscow and didn't. Leningrad is still holding. Now Soviet troops are pounding them at the front. And don't forget the partisans. Did you hear about the raid on Durasovo? It means they are strong. That list may get us into serious trouble."

Shulga thought for a minute.

"No," he said, "you are wrong. The Germans will defeat the Bolsheviks. I'm sure!"

"I don't know," Kudimov said uncertainly. "We need to be more careful with those Germans, just in case. God helps those who help themselves."

Shulga quickly became drunk, and spoke less assuredly.

"What should we do?" he looked inquiringly at Kudimov. "Give me some advice."

"We need to think. Since you've already turned in the list, there's nothing we can do about that. But it would have been better not to have rushed."

They drank some more.

"Why are you against the Soviet government," Shulga asked suddenly. "In my case, it's clear. It got me good a couple of times. But why you?"

Kudimov was silent.

"Why don't you answer," Shulga grimly fastened his drunken eyes on him.

"I'm thinking about how to explain," Kudimov said, "I didn't have enough room to move under that government. I feel I am capable of more than being a teacher. The only thing is..."

"What?"

"The Germans aren't the ones to give me what I need," Kudimov said sullenly.

"Who then?"

"If the Americans or the English came," Kudimov tried to explain.

"Why them?"

"They encourage individual initiative, but the Germans... The Germans are out to destroy the Russian people and Russia with them."

"You're a smart one," Shulga said. "Hard to figure you out right away. Why don't we have another instead."

They drank. Shulga grew more intoxicated, and tightly gripped the glass of vodka in his hand.

"You're a coward."

"You just have to be more careful," Kudimov said, putting his empty glass down with a bang. "I'm no coward, but is the gendarmerie going to protect us? Or the Gestapo? Or the police? I haven't seen hide nor hair of them."

Shulga looked at him angrily through drunken eyes, and snickered:

"Aren't you a careful one. I talked to Klaus about that, and he said they'll be here soon. Tomorrow morning at eight the Communists are being taken away. People from the punitive brigade are to arrive at dawn. They'll round up all our enemies and drive them to the station."

"Where will they go from the station?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't ask?"

"I don't think we're supposed to ask the questions, Kudimov. They are. Our job is to carry out orders. Remember, if the Communists come back in power, it's the end of us. As soon as they're

gone we can relax. Let's drink to that. We have nothing to be afraid of. Klaus and Ebert have a punitive brigade, and they'll take care of everything. You and I have nothing to do with it."

"I had absolutely nothing to do with it," Kudimov interrupted. "I didn't draw up that list."

"Look at you! Scared! That's right, you didn't draw up the list. I take full responsibility. I'm not afraid of anybody," Shulga shouted angrily. The next instant his voice changed to a tearful whine: "But without Maria I'm afraid. I'm terribly afraid."

Kudimov tried to comfort him.

"I'm not going anywhere today. They can all go to hell," Shulga said suddenly, wiping away his drunken tears. "I'm going to drink until Maria comes back. Pour me another one. Actually, I'd like to lie down."

Kudimov put him to bed and sat down at his feet. "We're in trouble," he thought. "How will it all end?"

Shulga slept about three hours, and when he awoke his face was swollen.

"I'm going home," he announced, and left.

Once he reached his door he began to shout for Taras to bring him some tea. Irina came to meet him.

"Taras is with Sergei. I'll bring you tea."

"I don't care who does it, just be sure to make it strong. I have to go to my superiors soon."

Irina brought him a cup and he drank it slowly, savoring every sip.

"Pour me some more," he demanded.

After he drank, he washed up, doused himself with cologne, and left.

"What a horrible man," Irina thought. "He didn't even ask about Zoya Andreyevna."

Shulga went to see the head of the gendarmerie, Oberlieutenant Klaus. He felt the guard at Klaus' house looked at him contemptuously as he passed.

"May I come in?" he asked hesitantly, knocking at the door.

Klaus' aide opened the door. Klaus was not alone—Ebert was there.

"I'm glad you've finally come," he said. "We were just about to look for you."

"What can I do for you?"

"What can you do?" Klaus said, standing up. "You can't seem to do anything. Or is it that you don't want to?" His voice was as cold as ice. Shulga became frightened.

"Tell me why five people included in your list have disappeared without a trace?" he continued.

Shulga was dumbfounded, and remained silent.

"I am speaking to you," the Oberlieutenant said, beginning to get angry.

"I have no idea."

"I told you he is an utter fool," Ebert said, barely moving his lips.

"Either a fool, or pretending to be one. What should we do with you? Put you before a firing squad?"

"Oh, please! I'm not guilty of anything. I really don't know," Shulga pleaded.

"The main thing is it was the Communists who disappeared," Klaus said. "The sympathizers are still here, but the important ones got away. It's as if they were warned."

"I didn't show anyone the list," Shulga babbled. "I swear to God! I didn't show anyone. I drew it up myself and gave it to you myself. No one knew about it."

"All right. Get up!" Klaus said, more calmly.

Shulga scrambled to his feet.

"I swear I didn't..."

"We must send the rest to Durasovo tomorrow, Ebert," Klaus said firmly.

"Tomorrow at eight, as we agreed," the head of the punitive brigade said.

"And you are to go along, Shulga," Klaus added.

"Yes sir!"

"Now go."

"Yes sir."

Shulga was completely devastated. He could not understand how something like that could have happened. "I told Kudimov about the list, but I never showed him," he thought.

The next morning at the crack of dawn, Shulga was at the collective farm offices. The twelve "unreliable" people had already been brought there. Soldiers from the punitive brigade stood near the building with dogs. Several village residents had gathered.

"Where are they taking them?"

"Someone said to a camp."

"Not to a camp, but to work in Germany."

Klaus and Ebert arrived around eight. They gave orders to the soldiers.

Kudimov appeared, but hung back, as if uninvolved. Remembering the previous day's conversation, Shulga did not approach him.

Finally those arrested lined up in pairs. There were nine men and three teenagers.

"Why are they taking the boys?"

"They were members of the Young Communist League."

"Those damn Germans don't even spare the young."

The soldiers surrounded those arrested, and the small column moved toward the highway. Shulga followed behind, while Kudimov remained off to one side.

The dogs were very well-trained, and walked calmly on leashes beside their masters. They did not even bark.

Klaus and Ebert caught up with Shulga, who was moving slowly.

"You need go no further," Klaus said. "Won't you be bored when we have eliminated all the Communists from the village, Headman?"

Shulga shrugged his shoulders. Finally, he said: "There are still plenty of traitors around. We can't trust anyone."

"You are right," Klaus agreed. "For that reason, go tell the others that anyone who is against the new order will be sent to Germany to work. Or even worse, to a concentration camp."

"I'll tell them," Shulga promised.

A car came for the officers, and they drove away.

Shulga went back to the office building. People were still hanging about. He raised his hand:

"Attention, everyone..."

People eyed him with hostility.

"Where is Kudimov?" Shulga thought. "Has he run off?" Then he noticed him in the crowd, relaxed, and felt more sure of himself.

"The Oberlieutenant asked me to tell you that anyone resisting the German Command will be severely punished. Is that clear?"

"It's clear. It's real clear," a voice said from the crowd.

"Should I mention the concentration camp?" Shulga thought. "Probably better to wait."

"Anyone resisting will be sent to work in Germany," he continued aloud. "Those connected with the partisans will be dealt with particularly harshly. Remember that."

People began to disperse. Kudimov came over to him.

"What did Klaus say to you?"

"Nothing much."

"Did he mention a new list?"

"No, why?"

"Strange," Kudimov said. "He has asked me to draw up a second list of unreliable elements. He said to consider everyone carefully and then compile the list. He gave me a week."

"Ha, ha," Shulga seemed pleased. "Congratulations."

That evening, when it had begun to get dark, a rumor began to circulate in Berezovka.

"The partisans attacked the column."
"They freed the prisoners."
"The punitive brigade was destroyed."
Sergei raced home.
"Is it true?" Irina asked.
"Yes! The partisans got the Germans, and those who had been arrested are safe."
Taras appeared.
"Have you heard?"
"Heard what?" Sergei asked, looking surprised.
"About the partisans?"
"No. What happened?"
"I haven't heard either," Irina said.

XII

It rained all night long. Toward morning it let up, but the sky was full of black clouds. A cold, biting wind blew. Autumn was approaching.

The steady pounding of the rain kept Shulga awake all night. At times it seemed to him that it was not rain drops falling on the roof, but pieces of lead pounding on his head. When he got up in the morning, his head rang and things swam before his eyes. After the horrible events of the previous day, he felt like a piece of straw, bent and blown about by the wind. He was terribly worried about the partisan attack. It meant they were well organized and strong—if there were not a lot of them they never would have risked such a serious operation. He was also worried about how they had found out that the column would pass through the forest along that particular road. Who had informed them? Obviously, someone in Berezovka. These thoughts tormented him, and he was filled with despair. Kudimov's phrase: "the people will take their revenge on us" pounded in his ears. He had also rejoiced too soon yesterday: Klaus had called him and given him the same assignment as Kudimov—to make up a second list.

Gerasim poured himself a glass of moonshine and drank it down. He stood up, thought for a minute, and poured himself another.

"Where has Kudimov disappeared, I wonder," he thought in passing.

He drank.

"Seems the partisans are strong," he thought. "First they attacked Durasovo. Then the column. That's serious. But who orga-

nized them and when? Were the Bolsheviks prepared for the war beforehand? Kudimov has good reason to be afraid of reprisals."

He heard a knock at the gate, and started. Then, pulling himself together, he went outside and opened the gate. The former collective farm accountant, Irinarkhi, his uncle on his father's side, stood there.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"I was gone. Can I come in?" Irinarkhi did not look him straight in the eye, and had a washed-out, dejected appearance.

"Yes," Shulga said uncertainly. He did not really like his uncle, who was dull, silent and reserved. After the arrest of his brother, Shulga's father, he had disappeared, later to reappear unexpectedly and get a job as the collective farm accountant. Claiming illness, he did not go to the recreation center or meetings, and avoided other people.

"You been out of prison long?" he asked, more for form than for actual information. He knew perfectly well when the Germans had set his nephew free and when they had chosen him headman. He certainly had not hurried to pay a call. For some reason he had hesitated, and only now decided to make an appearance.

"Long enough. Where have you been?" Shulga asked.

"Not where you were," Irinarkhi said evasively, not looking him in the eye. "I've come to see you because I don't have contact with the new people in power. Maybe you can help?"

"You're a little old," Shulga said, looking his uncle over from head to foot, and blurting out the first thing that came into his head.

"Only in years. I still get around."

"You want a drink?"

"All right, though I'm not much of a drinker."

"Sit down."

"Where's your wife?" Irinarkhi asked.

"She's sick in bed in the next room. My son's there too. Taras!" he shouted. "Come here!"

"What do you want?" Taras asked, coming out of the back room.

"Fix us some tea."

Outwardly, Irinarkhi was Shulga's opposite. He was tall and thin with a gaunt, long face and yellow blotches on his cheeks. His grey hair had grown so sparse that it looked like straw sticking out in all directions. He had a goatee, and even resembled a goat when he ate or talked quickly.

"Thank God, we've met at last," he said. "Life has sent the two of us traveling. Life is cruel. Very cruel. Well, let's drink."

They drank without toasting. The conversation flagged.

Taras placed a large copper kettle and a plate of stew on the

table. He glanced at his father in disgust: he was in a filthy underwear shirt, his cheeks were unshaven, and his eyes dull.

"I'm going out."

"Go ahead, son," Shulga said gently, for Irinarkhi's benefit.

The two men again were silent.

"You want a job?" Shulga suddenly asked.

"Why not."

"There is something that needs to be done. Maybe you can be of help to me."

"Fine."

"Just a minute," Shulga said, and he got some paper from the upper shelf of the closet. He sat down, looking important. "The Germans want a list of all the family members of Communists and activists in the village. You interested in helping?"

"Sure. I certainly know them all."

"Just remember that this is a secret assignment of the German command. You and I are the only ones who are to know."

"I didn't think it was for the Soviets."

"This isn't only for the Germans," Gerasim explained. "We'll get rid of all the dangerous people in the village."

"God grant we get rid of them. Then we can relax, nephew," Irinarkhi said maliciously.

Suddenly they heard a car drive up. Shulga started.

"Who could that be?"

Klaus, Ebert and a third man in a black uniform were already approaching the house. Shulga hurried outside.

"Shulga, this is Hauptsturmfuehrer Meyer. He is from the Gestapo."

"Uhh, welcome, Hauptsturmfuehrer Meyer," Gerasim said respectfully, but rather flustered. "This is my uncle," he explained when they had gone inside. "We are having tea. Can I..."

"We haven't come for tea, but to check you out," the Hauptsturmfuehrer cut him short, staring at him through his glasses.

Shulga was already trembling, and after hearing Meyer's icy tone and seeing his pale, death-like face, he came apart completely.

"I am sure you are aware that the partisans ambushed and killed our soldiers. You are also aware that the Communists who were among those arrested have joined the partisans."

Shulga remained silent. He did not know what to say. He was completely sober now.

"I don't know..." he mumbled.

"You are supposed to know!" Meyer shouted, and struck the table with such force that the glasses clinked and the bottle of vodka jumped. "We will return to that subject later," he said.

"The partisans and Communists I will deal with myself. Your job is to find a place for those who are with me, including the soldiers of the punitive brigade. What do you suggest?"

"Don't worry, Hauptsturmfuehrer Meyer. I think we can make you comfortable in the collective farm recreation center. It has a huge director's office. And then there are the collective farm offices themselves."

"'Collective farm'—what does that mean?" Meyer was furious. "It's time you forgot these Soviet terms, Headman!"

"I'm terribly sorry."

"Begin immediately," Meyer ordered. "I also have some business to settle with you..." He did not complete the sentence. Turning sharply, he left. Klaus and Ebert hurried after him, giving Shulga ferocious looks.

At that moment Shulga resembled a dog who plays up to his master and wags his tail, but is cursed and kicked in return. Bearing the pain, the animal continues to wag his tail, afraid that his master will throw him out for good. Upset, Shulga downed a glass of vodka, wiped his mouth with his hand, and stood quietly for a while.

"It's a hard job you've got. I don't envy you," Irinarkhi said, when the car had pulled away with a roar.

"I have to get to work," Gerasim said absent-mindedly.

"I'll come by again this evening," Irinarkhi promised, but Shulga did not even hear him.

Shulga hurried to the square where the recreation center and offices were located.

"Thank goodness, they weren't destroyed in the bombings," he thought. "Otherwise, where could I put the Germans?"

Meyer looked over the director's offices.

"Put everything in order. This will be mine. Find other rooms for my associates."

Shulga picked three more rooms and twelve soldiers from the punitive brigade set themselves up there.

"What a coincidence," Shulga thought. "They held twelve arrested men here, and now there are twelve Germans. On the other hand, maybe it's not a coincidence."

He still had not finished tidying up the rooms when Meyer called him.

"We will begin the investigation with you, Headman." There were three other Germans in black officers' uniforms in the room as well.

"Do you need an interpreter?" Shulga asked subserviently.

"I think I can manage myself," Meyer said sarcastically. Then he said something to the investigators in German.

"So, Headman, answer our questions. And without beating about the bush." Meyer fixed his gaze on Shulga. "Where is the partisan detachment located? Who commands it? How many men are in the detachment?"

"I don't know, Hauptsturmfuehrer Meyer," Shulga said, making a helpless gesture with his hands.

"Let's say you don't know. But we must find out as soon as possible. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you have people you can trust in the village?"

Shulga was at a loss for a moment. Who could he trust? Kudimov, and now Irinarkhi? That was all.

"Unfortunately, very few," he said evasively.

"In your work it is essential that you rely on dependable, trustworthy people," Meyer admonished. "Go and think. You are free for now."

Meyer was uneasy. He had been in Russia three months, and had come up against a problem that had not existed in Holland, Austria or France. Russians, as a rule, were not willing to cooperate with the Germans, and people like Shulga were an exception. The Gestapo had to rely on them, even though most of them worked badly.

"One more thing," Meyer stopped Shulga at the door. "I am assigning you an aide. He is young and energetic, and one of your countrymen. Treat him well and he'll help you. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir," Shulga said. He had expected a more severe reprimand. He left the Gestapo completely drained. He had gone no more than a few steps when he felt hot. Either the vodka was just taking effect, or he had caught a cold. By the time he got home he felt terrible. He immediately collapsed on the bed.

Lying there, he thought for a long time. Where could he find the answers to the Gestapo's questions? How could he discover where the partisans were, who commanded them, and where in the forest the former collective farm chairman was hiding? And who knew where the Communists had disappeared? If he had that information, he would have immediately reported it, but he was in the dark.

He had cramps in his arms and legs, and he shivered. His head ached and his eyes refused to focus. Shulga was afraid he was seriously ill. All those years in prison he had not been sick. Was he going to fall ill now, when he was out? His thoughts got more and more frightening. About this time, Maria walked in.

Forgetting all about his aches and pains, he raced over and smothered her with kisses.

"That's enough! You've gone crazy," Maria said, pushing him away.

"Where have you been? Why were you gone so long? It was terrible without you. Just terrible," he mumbled happily.

It was damp and uncomfortable in the house and Maria suggested that they light the stove. Shulga calmed down only when they both sat down at the table, and Maria took two bottles of vodka from her bag.

"God bless you, you clever girl. I'm so sick of that moonshine and German schnapps," he said. Then he grew grave: "I'm afraid I'm getting sick."

"Why?"

"All my muscles ache, and I feel weak. I think I have a high fever too. I can't afford to get sick right now. I have so much to do." He didn't mention the list, or Meyer's questions, and only talked about Irinarkhi's visit, but it was the things he did not mention what tormented him more than anything else.

Taras entered hesitantly.

Shulga looked closely at his son. Taras had grown up. He was taller, and had changed considerably. His black hair was neatly combed, his brows were thick, his eyes shone, and his face glowed. He was a handsome boy. To think he was his son!

"It looks like I'm sick, son," he said in a pitiful voice.

"Can I make you some hot tea?"

"That would be nice," Shulga said, softening from his son's kindness and attention.

Taras brought the kettle, lingered near the table, and then said firmly:

"Kudimov is dangerous."

"How do you know?"

"Something tells me. I sense it."

Shulga, who had forgotten about his fears, for a short time, again was overwhelmed by disturbing thoughts. Taras left the room quietly.

"Kudimov, Kudimov," Shulga thought. "Who is he? Who's side is he really on? Why did he say people would take their revenge on us when we were making up the list of Communists? And he repeated it several times. Was he just trying to frighten me, or is he a Communist sympathizer? I'll need to be careful and watch him."

Someone knocked at the gate, and Maria went to open it.

A young man named Yuri walked in, carrying a carbine. He had joined the German police only recently. He told Shulga that he had been sent by Meyer, and that the Gestapo officer wanted to know where the partisans were, where former collective farm chair-

man Shakhov was, and had ordered them to report on suspicious and dangerous people. The policeman also said that Kudimov, who had been interrogated, had assured Meyer that Sergei Esin was the person who had informed the partisans when those arrested were being taken away. When Meyer had asked for proof, Kudimov had reported that he had seen Sergei running to the forest.

Shulga was taken aback, and called Taras.

"Where is your friend, Sergei?"

"He isn't feeling well."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He was wounded in the hip and can't walk."

Shulga looked at the policeman as if to say: "Did you hear that?" The policeman was also surprised. He glanced at Shulga, who was lost in thought.

"Could Kudimov have warned the partisans?" he asked.

"Well, I guess that is possible."

Yuri moved closer to Shulga.

"There is something very strange here," he whispered. "How can a boy who was hit in the leg run to the forest? He can't even walk without limping. Second, who drew up the list of Communists? You and Kudimov. Who knew the prisoners were being taken to the station? You and Kudimov. How could the boy get hold of that information? No, Headman Shulga. If someone notified the partisans, it was either you or Kudimov. I don't think you'd cut your own throat, so that leaves Kudimov."

Someone walked past the window. It was Irina. Shulga did not notice her, and Irina, having glanced inside, could not believe her eyes. The man with a police armband and a carbine over his shoulder was the one she and Sergei had seen at the partisan camp.

XIII

It was late autumn. Icy winds blew. In the mornings light snow fell and at dawn, black clouds hung over the village. A piercing, autumn cold wave crept in from the west. The soldiers of the punitive brigade were freezing, as were Meyer and his assistants. He called Klaus.

"Can't this building be heated?" he demanded.

Klaus ordered Shulga to heat the stoves. The latter began to carry out the order grudgingly, muttering quietly to himself: "I didn't agree to work for you to become a stoker." But his head was full of other thoughts. It seemed he had picked up the trail.

That evening, Irinarkhi had come by, and Shulga had complained to him:

"I don't know how to carry out the orders from the Gestapo."

"Do you remember Fedotov, the secretary of the village council?"

"Yes, why?"

"Seems to me if you get him, the whole thing will become clear," Irinarkhi said, and put forth several convincing arguments.

Overjoyed, Shulga had run to Klaus.

"We must arrest Fedotov. I don't know how I could have overlooked him when I made up the list."

Klaus had listened to Shulga with interest.

"Fine. We'll arrest him immediately," he promised. "Meyer will be pleased if you are on the right track."

That night Ebert and his men arrested Fedotov, and he was taken to Klaus.

"Are you a Communist? A partisan?"

Fedotov remained silent.

Klaus struck him on the cheek.

"Are you going to answer my questions?"

"Yes," Fedotov said.

"Are you a partisan?"

"No, I am not," Fedotov said truthfully, thinking: "Actually, I am not a partisan, but only a courier." He smiled.

Not getting anywhere with him, Klaus sent him to Meyer. It was now warm in the Gestapo headquarters, and Meyer had thawed out.

"Good work, Klaus. You have done well. And that headman of yours isn't as bad as I thought."

Meyer did not think Fedotov looked like a Communist or a partisan. He was fairly old, and did not show signs of Bolshevik fanaticism. He behaved calmly, even a bit listlessly.

"Did you beat him?" Meyer asked Klaus, noticing the red blotch on Fedotov's face.

Klaus was not sure how to answer. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Very bad if you did," Meyer said.

Then he turned to Fedotov.

"Please, sit down," he said politely. "Were you a member of a local Soviet government?"

"I was the secretary of the village Soviet."

"For how long?"

"Over three years."

"What were your duties?"

"Virtually everything. We made general improvements, built a school and this recreation center. Repaired the roads. That kind of thing."

"The roads are terrible here," Meyer commented. "Only one of them is in decent condition. The rest..."

"We did not finish. The war interrupted our work."

"The war didn't only interrupt, it helped," Meyer said.

"I can't say," Fedotov answered.

Meyer looked Fedotov over from head to foot, and then continued in a completely different tone:

"You are a Communist!"

"The deputies of village councils are not all Communists."

"But you are," Meyer repeated nastily. "Do you maintain contact with other Communists?"

"No, I don't."

"Where is the partisan detachment?"

"I don't know."

"Where is Shakhov?"

"I don't know."

"Kolesov?"

"I don't know."

"Who informed the partisans that those arrested were to be taken from the village?"

"I don't know."

One of the investigators stood up and asked Meyer a question. The latter nodded. The investigator approached Fedotov, jerked him out of the chair, and kicked him in the stomach. Fedotov swayed on his artificial legs and fell to the floor. The investigator then began to kick him in the stomach and the head.

Meyer, as if chilled, threw his coat over his shoulders and poured himself a glass of brandy.

Fedotov lay quietly on the floor, not even moaning.

"Get him up!" Meyer bellowed.

Two investigators jerked Fedotov up and shoved him in the chair. His face was blank, expressing neither pain nor fear.

As soon as they let him go, he began to lean to one side, and fell to the floor.

The soldier at the door and the investigators lifted him back in the chair.

"Water," Meyer said curtly.

A soldier brought a mess-tin of water and poured it on Fedotov's head. He opened his eyes.

"Tell us where the partisans are or you'll be shot on the spot," Meyer threatened, pulling a gun from his holster and placing it at Fedotov's head. The latter remained silent.

"You swine!" Meyer shouted, and threw the coat from his shoulders. He beat Fedotov with his fists and the butt of his pistol. When the prisoner again fell, he kicked him.

One of the soldiers turned away.

Exhausted, Meyer ordered them to take Fedotov away. After resting a bit, he ordered that the headman, Kudimov and Sergei be brought in.

Sergei, limping, entered the room with Kudimov, and Shulga dragged along behind.

"Everyone sit down, except you," Meyer said to Sergei. "What can you tell us about him?" Meyer asked Kudimov, pointing to the boy.

"I saw him running to the forest on the day before those arrested were to be sent from the village," Kudimov answered nervously.

"What do you have to say?" Meyer asked Sergei.

"I wasn't running, but walking home," Sergei answered.

"Were you wounded?"

"Yes."

"Show me."

Sergei lowered his pants. On his hip there was a large scar.

"But you have no trouble walking? Isn't that so?"

"I walk fine, but I can't run," Sergei said.

"If you tell us the truth, we'll let you go," Meyer promised.

"I have nothing to tell."

"What do you think, Headman?"

"I don't know, Hauptsturmfuehrer Meyer. I really don't know," Shulga said. "I don't like the Esins, but I have nothing against the boy. He's quiet. He and his sister helped my son. I don't suspect him."

"Don't trust anyone!" Kudimov shouted. "He's the one who warned the partisans."

Shulga looked at Kudimov angrily. Sergei stood calmly. Losing control, Kudimov hit the boy with all his might, and then struck him again and again. Meyer, grinning encouragingly, poured Kudimov a glass of brandy.

"If you know anything, tell us," Shulga said softly to Sergei.

Sergei remained silent. "People become traitors from cowardice," he said to himself, thinking of Shulga and Kudimov.

They spent more time with the boy than they had with Fedotov.

"We don't need to torture or beat him," Meyer thought. "There is always time for that. The important thing with a child is to win his confidence and be gentle. If he is guilty, he will tell everything in the end."

But Sergei remained silent.

Meyer finally lost his patience, and began to beat the boy himself. He threw him on the floor and kicked him as hard as he could. The unhealed wound reopened and blood began to flow. Blood also spurted from Sergei's nose. He lost consciousness.

He was dragged to the guards' quarters, and thrown into a dark room.

He remained unconscious for hours, but towards morning he opened his eyes to find Kudimov standing over him.

"Confess that you told the partisans."

Sergei was silent.

"Who did, if not you?" Kudimov continued.

"You," Sergei said suddenly. "You, you, you!"

Kudimov stepped back.

"What are you talking about? Are you crazy? I'm no traitor."

"You are the real traitor," Sergei said firmly.

Kudimov hurried away. Soon Shulga came to see the boy, and Sergei repeated that it had been Kudimov. He told Klaus the same thing. Finally, Meyer arrived, and Sergei reported that Kudimov had notified the partisans.

While the investigation was in progress, Klaus called Shulga in.

"Did you hear that the partisans carried out two operations on the highway? They destroyed a convoy with provisions and three trucks with fuel."

"I heard about it, Oberlieutenant."

"What do you think we should do?"

"I don't know."

"We have to pick up on the trail of the partisans, damn them."

"Maybe Kudimov will help?" Shulga suggested.

"Do you suspect him, too?"

"Well, I don't like him, I can tell you that much," Shulga said evasively.

The investigation reached a dead end. All the efforts of Meyer, his assistants, Klaus and Ebert had gotten nowhere. Meyer had one last hope.

"Send for that new policeman. Yuri, I think his name is."

When Yuri arrived, he looked at Meyer meaningfully and requested that Shulga and Kudimov be present, as well as Klaus and Ebert. Meyer looked suspiciously at him, but decided to honor his request. When everyone had gathered, Yuri began:

"You gentlemen have conducted a thorough investigation into finding the link with the partisan detachment in the village in order to discover where the detachment is located. However, the desired results were not achieved. Not because every effort was not made, but because the partisans and their contacts have tricked us. I thought about it for some time, went around the village and spoke to many people, and have reached the following conclusion. Who knew that the Communists were to be sent from the village? Only four people: Oberlieutenant Klaus, Lieutenant Ebert, Headman Shulga and policeman Kudimov. It stands

to reason one of them informed the partisans about the column. Obviously, it was not Herr Klaus or Herr Ebert. It wasn't Shulga either. He tries to do his best, and he was the one who drew up the list. It is ridiculous to think that the person who made up the list would inform the partisans. Only one person remains." Yuri fell silent.

Everyone looked at Kudimov.

"It wasn't me! It wasn't me! That's a lie!" Kudimov screamed.

"I don't know whether it's a lie or the truth," Yuri said. "But Shulga can confirm that Kudimov tried to frighten him with the possibility of retributions, and to convince him to delay in compiling the list. Kudimov also said, forgive me, gentlemen, that the Americans and British, the Soviet Union's allies, are better than the valiant German soldiers."

"That's true," Shulga hurriedly agreed. At that moment he hated Kudimov and hoped that by destroying him, he would save his own skin.

"I don't think Esin is involved," Yuri added. "He's just a boy, and besides, he has been wounded and can't run. His wound has even reopened."

"Let the boy go immediately," Meyer ordered. "We've been wasting time on little children when we have a real enemy right under our noses. Arrest Kudimov!"

Kudimov fell to his knees, babbled something and cried, but the soldiers grabbed him under the arms and dragged him from the room.

"I forgot to mention that three days ago, Kudimov led a family which sympathized with the German Command to the steep ravine not far from the village and shot them all," Yuri told Meyer. "It seems they were the parents, brothers and sisters of one of Kudimov's victims. The question is why did Kudimov, who has not shot one Communist, murder an entire family which sympathized with the Germans? Even Headman Shulga does not know of that incident. Obviously, Kudimov was carrying out orders from the partisans."

"I commend you on your work, and assign you the job of shooting Kudimov," Meyer said. "I'll sign the order immediately."

"What about Fedotov?" Yuri recalled.

"What about him?"

"It is clear he had no part in this business."

"You don't think so?"

"Of course not. And I checked: he is definitely not a Communist."

"All right. I'll see he is freed," Meyer promised.

XIV

Irina ran happily to Zoya Andreyevna.

"They let Sergei go! But they beat him badly. His wound reopened."

"Poor boy."

It was only a week later that Sergei was able to limp to Zoya Andreyevna's himself. He leaned on a cane.

"As you see, justice triumphed. Kudimov was shot and I am free," he said gaily.

"But look at you! Your eyes are sunken, you're all bruised, and your face is swollen. What horrible cruelty! Why do they torture children? I curse this terrible war. May all those who started it be destroyed. I hope Gerasim didn't hit you?"

"No, he didn't," Sergei said.

"Thank God," Zoya Andreyevna sighed, crossing herself. "At least he didn't do that."

While they talked, Taras went in and out of the room several times.

"You suffered twice at the hands of those monsters," Zoya Andreyevna said. "And my Taras' shoulder still gives him trouble."

Taras quietly motioned to Irina to come outside.

"Someone is looking for you," he said.

"Where is he?"

"I'll show you."

They went through the garden to a small grove.

"Just a minute," Taras said mysteriously.

Suddenly Martynov was before them.

"I have urgent work for you from Fedotov."

"Did they free him?"

"Yes, but he is being watched, and can't leave his house. Sergei is still weak and that is why Shakhov asked for you. Day after tomorrow at noon he will be waiting for you in an agreed upon spot. I'll explain where. Will you go?"

"Of course," Irina said.

"There is more. Shulga is drawing up a second list. There aren't as many names, but about twenty nevertheless. Taras saw it. He promised to find out the final version by tomorrow evening. Pass it on to Shakhov. Is everything clear?"

"Yes."

"One more thing. Shakhov wants Sergei to know that the partisans are very proud of him."

"How is Fedotov?"

"He has a broken rib."

The children were all together at Taras'.

"Son, has your father come back yet?" Zoya Andreyevna asked. "When he gets home, tell him I want to see him."

Soon Shulga came in. He glanced at Sergei strangely, as if he had wronged him in some way, but he did not speak. He looked dejectedly at his wife.

"How are you feeling?"

"All right. I want to talk to you." She turned to the children: "Go outside for a while."

When they had left she began:

"Gerasim, you are a very busy man. You don't even have time to ask about your wife who is dying. This is only the second time I've seen you in two months. You are ashamed to see me. People pay more attention to their livestock and their cats and dogs than you do to me. Never mind. I forgive you. But I have one request: don't touch Sergei and Irina. I would have died long ago if it weren't for them. In any case, it is every person's duty to repay kindness with kindness."

Shulga was silent. He hated his wife, was estranged from his only son, and here she was asking him to be nice to the Esin kids, the children of his bitterest enemy. No! But he said nothing aloud.

"God grant you a swift recovery," he hissed, and left the room.

When the children returned they found Zoya Andreyevna crying bitterly. They did what they could to comfort her, and she hugged them to her.

"I had always thought that Taras was my only child, but now, thank the Lord, I have three children. While I'm alive, you will look after me, and when I die, you will bury me. My dear children, I beg you to stay together, rely on one another, and support one another. Your strength is in your friendship and faithfulness. Only then can you overcome the trials of life. Don't expect kindness from those Nazi devils, or from people like him," she said, pointing to the room where Shulga was. "I hope you will be happy."

The children were too moved to speak.

"Irina, do you remember you told me about your father's camera?" Zoya Andreyevna suddenly recalled. "Do you still have it?"

"Yes. Papa got it as a prize at the agriculture exhibit."

"Could you take our pictures?"

"Yes, but why?"

"I would like a picture of me with you children and Taras."

"Just a second, I'll get it."

Irina raced home and was soon back with the camera. She took a picture of Zoya Andreyevna with Taras and Sergei, and then Taras photographed Irina and Sergei with his mother.

"Now I'm not afraid to die," Zoya Andreyevna said sadly. "There will be something to remember me by. This is so important in these difficult times."

Shulga's voice was heard from the next room. He was calling Taras.

"Fix us something to eat," he ordered. He and Irinarkhi were talking.

Taras brought them boiled potatoes, pickles, onions, bread and a bottle of moonshine. Irina helped. When Irina brought the tea, Shulga stared at the girl's adroit, slender figure. "Not bad," he said to himself. Irinarkhi, sitting solemnly at the table, stealthily watched as the children placed the food before him as if serving an important guest. He no longer resembled the former slovenly collective farm accountant. He often changed his suits, which he had suddenly acquired, wore a tie, and shaved every day. There was no trace of the neglected accountant in rags who had walked hunched over like an old man. He now stood up straight and his gait was lively, like a young man's. After all, he was the uncle of the headman himself. And he was doing extraordinarily secret and responsible work—that of drawing up a list of Communists, members of their families, partisans and other activists. He was proud that such important, secret work had been entrusted to him. That is why he was strutting so cockily.

"Here is the list," he said, when the children had left the room. He drank down a full glass of moonshine, and hungrily began to eat.

Shulga also drank, took a bite of pickle, and looked over the list.

"You included Esin's kids," he said, looking up.

"The children of a snake are snakes, and the children of a scorpion are scorpions," Irinarkhi said, chewing rapidly and pouring himself another drink. When he put down his empty glass he remembered Shulga, and noticing that his glass was empty, poured him a drink too. "Esin is our bitter enemy. He's at the front now, and if some stray bullet hits him in the head or chest, we can rest assured he went straight to hell. But if a bullet doesn't get him, then we need to send him there ourselves. First because he is a Communist, second because he's an officer, and finally, because he's our enemy. Since he isn't here, we need to destroy his children."

"But his kids work as my servants," Shulga said, lost in thought.

"It's up to you, nephew, but I don't agree," Irinarkhi continued. "If another Kudimov shows up and reports to the Gestapo that you are harboring the children of a Communist, you'll be in hot water."

"Kudimov would have reported to the partisans, not the Gestapo," Shulga objected. "And what does Kudimov have to do with it? Don't you try to scare me with the Gestapo. I know them and the gendarmerie a lot better than you do. They won't waste their time on trifles. Klaus and Ebert value my work."

"It was my job to tell you," Irinarkhi said. "You asked for a list and I drew one up. Do as you see fit. But remember, the children of snakes are snakes. I only want to warn you so they won't strike when things get worse."

"What do you mean, 'when things get worse'? The Germans are just outside of Moscow and you're talking about things getting worse? Listen, Irinarkhi, you are my close relative. Why haven't you asked about my wife? She's related to you too, by marriage. If I get sick does that mean you won't come to see me either?"

"Why do you say that? God grant her a quick recovery, and you good health and a long life," Irinarkhi said, avoiding the question. "It's time you stopped reproaching me all the time. Only God is without sin."

Actually, he had no desire to visit Zoya Andreyevna, and even avoided Taras. For Irinarkhi, every resident of Berezovka was dangerous. If he had had his way, he would have turned them all over to the Germans.

Suddenly the door opened. Ebert and three soldiers stood on the threshold.

"Headman, we have work to do. Tomorrow or the day after a group of high-placed officers are arriving here. Find places for them to live and work. By the way, they have their own food."

When Ebert had left, Shulga called the children:

"Come with me. We need to find clean sheets, get rooms ready, and stock up on liquor."

He ignored Irinarkhi, and turned only to tell him to leave.

XV

In the end it was Sergei, and not Irina, who went to the partisan detachment.

"I can walk, so I'll go," he said stubbornly.

He left Berezovka when it was barely light. This time it was different in the camp. He was met at the approaches to the camp by Grandpa Misha and Ivan Ivanovich. He did not see anyone else.

"You know, Sergei, since the Communists were freed the Germans have gotten wary," Ivan Ivanovich said, stroking his beard. "Soon after that we discovered a traitor among us. The enemy is

trying to find a way to get to us. Maybe there's more than one infiltrator. That is why we are being particularly careful."

It was not until late that night that Sergei was taken to Shakhov's dugout. There he saw his old acquaintance, Lieutenant Temirov, who was now the field-officer of the partisan detachment.

"The Germans really worked your protégé over, but he was tremendous," Shakhov told Temirov. "He held up under it all and did not betray anyone. A strong lad! A real soldier."

Shakhov listened to Sergei's report and thanked him on behalf of the detachment. Then he sat him down and poured him a mug of tea.

"Drink it while it's hot, and listen carefully. Keep going to the headman's house. The closer you are to him, the more information you can learn. Next—your suspicions concerning Irinarkhi are correct. Ivan Ivanovich told me everything. Before he appeared in Berezovka, Irinarkhi managed to do a lot in Ignatovka where the Germans set up a POW camp. He himself murdered over one hundred prisoners. We have sentenced him to death. And one more thing. Important events will be happening in your village in the next few days. A punitive brigade will be billeted there. By orders of the Fuehrer, many divisions from the West are being transferred to the Eastern Front. There is reason to suspect that part of those divisions will pass through Berezovka. If you or the others hear anything about that, let us know immediately. And finally, Nazi scouts are everywhere. Be careful, son."

When Sergei told him about Yuri the policeman, Shakhov interrupted him.

"We know. Don't concern yourself with him. We'll take care of it ourselves."

After safely returning to the village, Sergei took off his muddy boots and damp pants, and fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

He awoke when Irina ran in and shouted to him to get up and come outside. He leaped out of bed and was on the street in seconds.

"Look!" Irina repeated, and pointed to the sky.

Three Soviet fighter planes were chasing a formation of German bombers, firing at them.

"Great!" Sergei whispered excitedly.

"Great," repeated Irina.

Suddenly smoke began to pour out of one of the German planes and it lost altitude. The other five bombers flew higher, while the Soviet fighters turned sharply and flew to the east.

The injured bomber managed to reach the forest before its wings hit the trees and it crashed to the earth. There was an explosion.

Late that afternoon, the first column of tanks appeared on the empty highway. Armored carriers and motorcycles followed.

"That's what Shakhov was talking about," Sergei said. "Let's count them."

Behind the column were transport convoys with boxes and bags, and an endless line of Nazi soldiers.

The children ran to get pencil and paper. It was too much to remember. The lines stopped coming only two hours later, when it was completely dark.

Taras appeared at the door.

"Did you see all the trucks and soldiers on the highway?"

"Yes, what about them?"

"I counted everything, just in case," Taras said proudly. "My hand is tired."

"Good for you, Taras," Sergei praised him. "Irina and I did too."

"I almost forgot, there is some bad news," Taras added.

"What?"

"Tomorrow a special reinforced punitive brigade arrives," he said.

"How do you know?"

"From my father. He is completely exhausted. Guests every evening. They're all new officers I haven't seen before."

"Listen, Taras," Sergei said. "We have another important assignment for you. Can you remember the names and ranks of all these new Germans?"

"I'll try."

"It would be better to write them down, but be careful."

"O.K."

XVI

The following day members of the punitive brigade began to arrive, and two days later a new infantry division, which, according to Taras, was headed by General Schneider, billeted in the village. No one had seen the general yet, but soldiers and officers took over almost all the houses in the village, running the residents out to sheds and haylofts. A German major and his aide billeted in the Esin home, and Sergei and Irina also were forced to move to the shed.

The streets were full of cars, carts and equipment, soldiers and officers teamed everywhere, and patrols paced in front of most houses.

Shulga raced about the village with a worried look, trying to please everyone—both the Germans and the villagers—and failing miserably. Yuri the policeman helped. He turned out to be diligent, resourceful and practical, and it was easier for Shulga with him around. Nevertheless, no matter what they did, there were so many Germans that it was impossible to satisfy everyone. Either the rooms were too dark, or the roof leaked, or the woman of the house had small children and there was nowhere for them to live in such damp, cold weather.

Sergei and Irina continued to watch everything, and Taras told them the names and ranks of the German officers. The chaos in Berezovka was to their benefit.

Once they met Martynov on the street and were overjoyed.

"Do you have anything new?" he asked.

"Yes," Sergei said, "we wanted to go see Fedotov."

"Better stay away from him," Martynov said. "He is being watched and you could give him and yourselves away. Let's do this. Meet me tomorrow at this spot at 8 a.m. That suits you?"

"We'll bring all we have," Sergei said. "We wrote a lot down."

The next morning they gave Martynov their notes. Later that day Taras came to see them.

"Irina, please help me. We keep having guests. Tonight more are coming."

"That's good," Sergei said. "Maybe I'll come help too?"

"Sure."

"I'll have a look at Shulga's guests for myself, and maybe I'll hear something of interest," Sergei thought.

Maria was overjoyed when they appeared. "Am I grateful for help! Haven't seen you in ages. Together we'll have things ready in no time."

"Taras, come with me," his father said. "I need help fixing up rooms for the new arrivals."

"You mean more are coming?"

"An entire unit."

"When will it all end?"

"In Germany, in the Fuehrer's office," Shulga said. "Let's go. The others will get along fine without us."

Sergei heard that conversation. He peeked in at Zoya Andreyevna.

"How are you feeling?"

"All right, Sergei," she said. "You do whatever you have to do, and don't worry about me. Irina already gave me lunch and straightened everything up. I pray to God that he gives you, Irina and Taras health and strength. You'll need it to survive this horrible war. If only the word war was wiped from the face of the earth, and the invaders perished."

The important guests arrived at dusk. Shulga and Maria, who was dressed up and smelling of cologne, hurried from room to room. Apparently, one of those who had arrived was going to spend the night there. The Germans did not appear to be of very high rank. There were three officers, two men in civilian dress and an interpreter. They rubbed their hands merrily and sat down at the table. Obviously, they were cold after their trip and had dreamed of warming themselves up with food and drink.

They drank in silence, not proposing one toast. Shulga was the only one to talk, and he kept up an endless chatter. Occasionally the interpreter quietly repeated what he had said in German.

Toward midnight the guests left, and no one remained to spend the night.

"Listen, we have work to do," Taras told the others. "I just learned from my father that General Schneider and his retinue will be here tomorrow. I have an idea."

"What kind?" Sergei asked.

"What if Irina got the camera..."

"And what?"

"They won't have come empty-handed," Taras began, and he explained his plan:

Irina could hide in the shed, or maybe stay with his mother. When the Germans were drunk, the children could photograph their papers. Officers always carry map-cases.

The next day Irina arrived at Taras' house and Taras took her straight to his mother's room. She left the camera, and went to help Maria.

Shulga was in a good mood. The general's aide had brought food supplies an hour before. Everything was already prepared and all they had to do was serve it. Besides the traditional German schnapps, there was French brandy, wine with foreign labels, and cans of beer.

The guests arrived at noon.

General Schneider and Colonel Galler, a division chief of staff, took off their overcoats lined with fur. In addition to the general and colonel, there were four adjutants and an interpreter.

"Hello, dear hosts," the emaciated, freckled German translated the general's words.

Irina noticed that both the general and colonel had hung their map-cases on the backs of their chairs.

"I'm going, Maria," Irina said, and went to Zoya Andreyevna's room.

"Go on. If I need you, I'll call," Shulga answered hurriedly in place of Maria.

He had tried especially hard. After all, a general and colonel

had come all the way from Durasovo to see him. They did not stay in Berezovka where their division was billeted, and came only during the day. They lived in the regional center, in one of the best houses in town. It belonged to the former priest, who had been evacuated with his wife and two sons before the Germans arrived.

"It is very clean here," the interpreter said, relaying either the colonel's or the general's words.

"We try," Shulga exclaimed. After hesitating he gathered courage and added: "Please tell the general and colonel that I have prepared two fine rooms for them just in case they'd like to stay. The rooms are clean, warm and very comfortable. They don't have to hurry and can spend the night here if they wish."

The thin German translated.

"Gut!" the general said, and looked approvingly at Shulga.

They sat down at the table. Shulga felt it would have been out of place for him to propose a toast. The Germans talked among themselves, clinked glasses with one another and kept repeating: "Gut. Zehr gut. Gut."

The general's chauffeur brought a gramophone in from the car and handed it to Shulga. It was a Soviet one and brand new. The records were German.

Shulga wound it up, and sad music filled the room.

"Beethoven," the interpreter said.

Finally Shulga ventured a toast, first asking permission from the interpreter. The latter said something to the general, who smiled condescendingly.

"The General is not opposed."

"I am a simple Russian," Shulga began. "But I can speak for my people in saying that we are happy. Happy because we have been freed from Bolshevik oppression. We Russians are grateful that you have brought us freedom. I want to drink to our liberators, to the victorious German Army, to Herr Hitler, and General Schneider, and Colonel Galler and all our guests."

The Germans clinked glasses with him and drank.

"Zehr gut," the general repeated.

Irina heard the entire conversation through the door, but there was nothing of particular interest.

The Germans began to sing merrily. Though Irina did not understand the sharp, loud words, she was glad: it meant they were drunk and might decide to stay.

The conversation was now only in German, and was confused and jumped from subject to subject. Shulga, Maria and Taras felt uneasy since they did not understand German. Finally the general spoke to the interpreter.

"The General asks that you show him the rooms for rest."

"This way, please," Shulga said.

The general and colonel glanced at the rooms and nodded in satisfaction.

"The General says that the rooms are fine," the translator said. "They will sit a little longer and then lie down for a while."

"As they wish," Shulga said. "We are happy to be of service."

The guests returned to the table.

"They did not take their map-cases with them," Taras noted.

They remained at the table another hour or more. After the schnapps, they began on the brandy, and Shulga bustled about, filling their glasses.

The colonel rose and went over to the gramophone. He looked over the records and chose one.

"Weber?"

The general shook his head: "Wagner."

The guests listened to the music. The general unbuttoned his tunic with the Iron Cross and settled back in his chair. After the record finished, they drank some more. Again Shulga proposed a toast: "To your wives and children, gentlemen. To the wives and children of the victors!"

"Zehr gut! Gut. Zehr gut," the general and colonel nodded.

Then they stood up, took their map-cases, and headed for the rooms. Soon the general came out and looked in on the colonel. He said something to him, and the colonel came out. They both went over to where their coats were hanging.

"They would like to take a walk before retiring," the interpreter explained. "They need a bit of fresh air."

The adjutants put on their coats as well, and left with the officers.

"Irina, hurry!" Taras whispered.

Irina ran out of Zoya Andreyevna's room.

"This way," he said. "I'm right here."

Irina darted into the next room. She opened the map-case, photographed the papers, and put everything back as it was. She did the same in the next room.

"No one noticed?" she whispered in the hall.

"No. Go back to Mama's room!"

Irina was shaking for fear and tension, and her teeth chattered as if she were cold. Several minutes passed and no one returned. She had been in such a hurry that she had only taken two pictures in the second room. Now she realized she could have taken her time.

The evening passed quietly. Now they just had to wait for morning. Neither Taras nor Irina slept.

It was not yet eight when Irina whispered to Taras:

"I'm going now. Your mother is asleep. You did fine!"

"You're the one who did fine. Sergei will be pleased."

"Not only Sergei."

Irina got home to discover that Sergei had not slept either.

"I was worried about you. How did it go?"

"Everything is fine," Irina said. "Only I was stupid. I photographed all the papers in the general's case, but I was afraid they'd come back so I only took two pictures of the colonel's papers. I was in a hurry."

"Never mind. That's a real feat!"

"Some feat."

"No, Irina, I'm serious. You deserve a medal."

"What medal? We didn't do it for medals. Remember what Dad wrote in one of his letters: every evening we should ask ourselves what we did that day for the war effort. Let's think about getting this film to the partisans."

"I'll take it, and don't argue," Sergei said. "I feel fine. And I'd really like to see Lieutenant Temirov."

"When will you leave?"

"I think it's best to go at night. There are too many Germans about during the day. It's dangerous."

"You're right," Irina agreed.

"Let's get some sleep," Sergei suggested.

But they only managed to sleep for forty minutes before Taras woke them.

"I was just at Irinarkhi's," he said, out of breath. "My father sent me to get him. I came in and he was working on a list. There was another man with him. I told him Father wanted to see him, and he got up and left without a word. That other man stayed there."

"But your father already turned in a list," Sergei said in surprise.

"It probably means the one my father turned in didn't meet with their approval."

"Who was the man at Irinarkhi's?"

"A nasty-looking fellow, but I've never seen him before. Middle-aged, short. His face was yellowish, like people with consumption. His head was clean shaven," Taras explained.

"So Irinarkhi went to see your father?"

"He left immediately. And he took the list."

"That means we have work to do," Sergei said. "And it's urgent. Before evening, no later. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"I need the final list before dark. And try to find out from your father or Irinarkhi who that other fellow is. O.K?"

"I'll try."

"Was that man sitting close to the window?" Irina spoke up. "Maybe I could take his picture."

Sergei and Taras thought for a minute.

"Won't that be too dangerous," Sergei said.

"I'll be careful. Taras and I will go together, and I'll put the camera in a basket. No one will care where I am going."

"What do you think?" Sergei asked Taras.

"I think it might work," Taras said, a little uncertainly.

"Then go quickly."

XVII

Sergei arrived at the partisan camp before daybreak. He gave Shakhov the film, the list and the notes on German officers and the approximate number of men in the infantry division and field battalion billeted in Berezovka.

"Wait while we develop the film," Shakhov told him. "Just in case we need something else."

Sergei saw Nikolayev, Kolesov, Ivan Ivanovich and Grandpa Misha. Then he went to visit Temirov in his small, cosy dugout. The lieutenant was overjoyed to see him. He embraced and kissed him, repeating:

"My friend, my favorite little soldier."

He openly admired the boy, was proud of his bravery, and was astounded at the information Sergei gathered and the way he went about acquiring it. As young as he was, he was able to pick out and concentrate on the most important, the most needed details. "This war is forcing children to grow up quickly," the lieutenant thought, looking at the boy.

Sergei had changed before his eyes. He had met a quiet, shy, and it had seemed, weak boy, but even in his first battle, Sergei had behaved like a true soldier and had even been wounded. Now he was not only a partisan courier and scout, but a person who had gone through a Nazi interrogation and had not wavered before a strong and clever enemy.

As before, his clear, blue eyes shone, and his face was still gentle and ardent, but he was now more mature, self-controlled and determined.

Looking at Sergei, Temirov wanted to tell him everything about himself that he hadn't had time to tell him during their first meeting. Apparently Sergei was thinking of the same thing, because he asked:

"Where did you live before the war?"

"I lived near Tashkent," Temirov said, happy to answer his question. "My parents are cotton growers, and work at a collective farm on the Syr-Darya River. After finishing school I went to the Tashkent Military Academy. I graduated with the rank of lieutenant not long before the war and was assigned a company in one of the units on the western border. That's where I was when the war broke out. For three days we fought to the death and held the Germans, but we lost a lot of men and were finally forced to retreat. We kept retreating, fighting all the way. We got reinforcements, but had to retreat all the same. That's the way it went to Berezovka. In the battle there I was wounded. After I recovered the regiment commander called me in. The secretary of your Regional Party Committee, Kolesov, was with him and asked me to join the partisans and become field commander of the detachment. Kolesov had complained that there weren't enough military specialists in the detachment."

"What is a cotton grower?"

Temirov hesitated. It was as if someone had asked what is the sun or the moon.

"You've seen cotton, haven't you?"

"Sure."

"Well, it grows on bushes and the people who raise it are cotton growers."

"It's planted like wheat?"

"That's right. Shoots grow from seeds. All spring and summer the plants are watered, and they soak up the sun. Late in the summer buds appear. After they blossom, they turn into pods. Each bush usually has from ten to thirteen, and sometimes even fifteen pods. When the pods ripen, they burst open and white, fluffy cotton is inside."

"It must be hard to pick."

"It's extremely hard work. We grow hundreds of thousands of tons of cotton. Sometimes the harvest reaches a million tons. After the war you can come to Tashkent and become a cotton grower yourself."

"I know a lot about Tashkent," Sergei boasted.

"You do?"

"I read the book, *Tashkent—City of Bread*, by Neverov. And I know what Saltykov-Shchedrin wrote about it. It went something like this: if you are in a city where the statistic tables say: so many residents, so many parish churches, no secondary schools, no library, no hospital, one jail, etc., you can be certain that you are in Tashkent."

"In Shchedrin's time Tashkent was just such a place," Temirov agreed.

"Are you married?" Sergei asked.

"No. But I have a girl. A fine one."

"What is her name?"

"Dilorom. She's from my village. She teaches language and literature in the local school, and is studying by correspondence."

Grandpa Misha entered the dugout.

"Having a heart-to-heart talk?" he joked. "Shakhov is waiting." For some reason, Grandpa Misha was very pleased.

"Did he call for me too?" Temirov asked.

"He wants to see the both of you."

They went down a forest path of frozen mud, and came to a small clearing surrounded by bare birch trees and old oaks with dry leaves which rustled in the wind. There were three dugouts, one being the commander's.

"Go on. I've got to get back to my smithy," Grandpa Misha said.

Temirov and Sergei entered Shakhov's dugout. Nikolayev and Kolesov were there too.

"You have given us very valuable information," Shakhov said to Sergei. "The maps and field notes are extremely important. They give us a good idea of the Germans' plans, at least concerning the assignments of the new German division. The three of you did very well to gather information about the number and composition of German units and supply trains. As far as the photographs of Irinarkhi's friend, we'll find out who that traitor is. Now let's have something to eat. Sit down."

"These are for you, Sergei," Nikolayev said, smiling as he held out two photographs. "They don't seem to be connected with our work."

Sergei took the pictures. They were the ones of him, Taras, Irina and Zoya Andreyevna.

"We completely forgot about these," he said, embarrassed. "They were on the same roll of film."

"We realized that," Shakhov said. "By the way, we are sending your information to headquarters at the front."

"To headquarters at the front!" Sergei was filled with pride and excitement. "Maybe they'll even report it to Moscow!"

Sergei's tea had cooled off long ago, and he took sips of it every now and then. He wanted to add some sugar, but stopped himself, remembering his mother's words: a person who gives in to all his desires and cannot contain himself, does not command respect.

After everyone had eaten, Shakhov made a suggestion:

"Let's summon the group leaders to analyze the situation. Sergei, you stay here with us."

In a few minutes the dugout was full of people. Ivan Ivanovich was among them.

"You have the floor, Commissar," Shakhov said.

Nikolayev stood up.

"It is almost November. The Germans' plan of attack, which was supposed to have succeeded during the summer months, has clearly failed. The Nazis are not accustomed to fighting in the winter. But this does not mean that the enemy is weak. The information we received from Berezovka, with the help of Sergei Esin and his friends, tells us just the opposite. The Germans are concentrating more and more forces on the front. We have data on the composition of the new units which arrived in Berezovka and those which passed through, the operational maps of the infantry division transferred here from France, and the names of the commanders of the German sub-units. Judging by all this information, it seems the Nazis are preparing for a decisive attack on Moscow. They will probably attempt to take the capital before the anniversary of the revolution in November. That they will never succeed in doing. The Central Committee of the Communist Party, the country's political center, is located in Moscow as is General Headquarters, and the State Defense Committee. In order to help the capital hold out, we must intensify our attacks on the enemy in the rear. In connection with this I suggest the following..."

Nikolayev listed all the operations that were scheduled for the end of October and the beginning of November.

It was time for Sergei to return. Shakhov, Nikolayev, Temirov and Ivan Ivanovich took turns saying good-bye to him and embracing him.

"Maintain contact with Yuri. He is one of ours," Shakhov told him.

Sergei returned home safely before dawn. He winked gaily at Irina who had waited anxiously all night. Her eyes, puffy from lack of sleep, shone happily.

"These are of Zoya Andreyevna and us," he said, handing her the pictures. "We forgot they were on the same roll." Then he went to bed.

When he awoke, Irina was gone. He looked outside and saw Yuri, with a carbine over his shoulder. He was walking back and forth from the gate to the well. Another policeman came over to him. After a brief conversation, they began to walk together. Irina, who had hidden behind the gate, waited anxiously for the second policeman to leave. He finally did.

Irina immediately opened the gate and coughed. Yuri quickly went over to her.

"Sergei is back."

Yuri and Irina ducked into the shed.

"They are saying the Fuehrer's troops have taken Moscow," Yuri said, upset. "To celebrate, the Germans drank and sang songs all night."

"That's a lie!" Sergei cried. "In the partisan camp they said..."

"I know it is a lie, but Shulga is telling everyone that Moscow has been captured."

"A lie! Moscow is invincible, and that is because everyone will fight to their last drop of blood to defend the capital."

"I have a plan," Yuri said. "I can't carry it out but you could. We need to prepare leaflets. About fifty. A hundred would be even better. The text should say that Moscow will never surrender to the Nazis. Then we must distribute these among the villagers. They should know the truth."

"I'll do it," Sergei said.

"Me too," Irina added.

"Good," Yuri said. "But be careful. Print them in block letters so the Germans can't recognize the handwriting."

XVIII

An hour later the young Esins had a pleasant surprise. The Germans moved out of their house.

Apparently some units were being sent to the front, since other houses were emptied as well. General Schneider and Colonel Galler left too.

Sergei and Irina got paper and paint, and began to work.

"The text should be short," Sergei said. "How about: 'Do not believe the Nazis! Moscow stood for centuries, is standing now and will stand forever. Glory to the Red Army! Glory to our country! The enemy will be defeated. Victory will be ours!' What do you think?"

"I think it's fine."

"If something happens, hide the papers under the tablecloth," Sergei warned.

It was snowing outside and the wind grew colder with each passing hour. Berezovka was quieter now that part of the German troops and equipment had left. Empty houses and the charred remains of the bombings were now white with snow. That night the temperature dropped significantly.

Yuri was in no mood to go on patrol, but he had to. Particularly that night. He dressed warmly and went outside. He greeted

several German guards as he passed, and stopped to chat with one.

A light burned in the Shulga home. Yuri quietly opened the gate and glanced in the window. Shulga, Maria and Irinarkhi were sitting at the table.

"That means everything is fine," Yuri decided.

The snow began to fall harder. A dog howled somewhere in the distance. Yuri went around the corner of the house. He glanced at his watch: it was quarter to twelve.

The door creaked and Irinarkhi appeared. He went to the gate, opened it, and stopped to look around, as if deciding where to go.

Yuri jumped over the fence and walked toward him.

"Hello, neighbor. Have a nice evening?"

"It's you," Irinarkhi said. He was drunk, but still recognized Yuri.

"At my post, as ordered," Yuri said. "I'll take you home."

"Do you have a flashlight? I didn't bring one and the night is black as ink."

"I've got one."

They headed in the direction of Irinarkhi's house. The path led past a fence and several bare bushes. To the left, there was a deep ravine which had been used as a dump for years.

Yuri grabbed Irinarkhi's arm and led him to the left.

"Why are we going this way?" Irinarkhi asked.

"I want to show you something."

They pushed through the bushes and went to the edge of the ravine. Yuri let go of Irinarkhi, turned off the flashlight, and tore his carbine from his shoulder.

"You have been condemned to die, you murderer and traitor."

Before Irinarkhi had time to shout, Yuri pulled the trigger. He then pushed the body into the ravine with his foot. He had fired point-blank and the shot had been muffled. It was doubtful anyone had heard it.

The next morning two black cars accompanied by four motorcycles pulled up in front of the collective farm offices. The officials who got out hurried inside the building. The soldiers on motorcycles remained outside. Numb with cold, they stamped their feet and paced back and forth. "Just wait, you dogs," Yuri thought, watching the soldiers out of the corner of his eye. "Soon real winter will set in and you'll drop like flies."

Just then Yuri was summoned into the office building.

"Find the headman immediately and bring him here!" an officer ordered in a fury.

Yuri hurried off, demonstrating his zeal. He walked into Shulga's house and called Shulga, but no one answered. Yuri looked

around and noticed him asleep in bed. He shook him roughly, but the headman did not wake up, obviously still under the effects of the previous night's drinking. Taras came in and tried to wake his father, but Shulga only swore incoherently. The boy poured cold water on his father's head, but that did not help either. Then Taras leaned over and shouted in his ear:

"Gestapo!"

Shulga was terrified of that word, and sat up immediately. But on seeing Yuri and Taras, he relaxed and sank back on the pillow.

Yuri lost patience and shouted:

"The Gestapo wants to see you. Get up and get dressed immediately."

Shulga tried to stand, but his head pounded and his eyes refused to focus. He took one step and collapsed on the floor. Yuri leaned his carbine against the wall, picked him up and helped him wash and dress. He had to hold Shulga under the arm as they went out the door. However, as soon as Shulga stepped outside and saw the cars and motorcycles in front of the offices, he sobered up immediately. As they walked, Yuri gave him advice. The main thing for him was not to lose the headman's trust.

Shulga came out of the former collective farm offices very gloomy.

"They must have really given it to him," Yuri thought, watching him go. He hurried after him.

"Tomorrow morning the punitive brigade is carrying out a round-up," Shulga said. "All those on the list are to be brought to the square. They are being sent to Germany."

"What are they going to do there?"

"You're a strange fellow, Yuri. What do you think they'll do? They'll work."

"I see," Yuri said.

Shulga wanted to say something else, but hesitated. Finally he continued:

"I drank a little too much last night. Don't tell anyone. By the way, the order to send those people to Germany is secret. Let it remain between you and me."

"You're a strange fellow too, Gerasim," Yuri said. "Do you think there is anyone here I am closer to than you? I don't mix with anyone but you. Remember, you are like an older brother to me, a friend, a comrade. What you know, I know, and vice versa. This war brought us together. I am ready to sacrifice my life for you."

"I am too, Yuri. Let's drink to our friendship. My head is splitting."

They went to Shulga's.

The next morning the round-up began. They picked up rela-

tives of Communists and activists. The village was shaken. Those arrested were herded into the office building. Klaus had ordered only women and teenagers to be taken. The old men were left alone.

"Keep an eye on them until the truck comes," Ebert told the guards when he arrived.

In a half-hour the arrested were ordered into a covered truck. A non-commissioned officer sat in the front with the driver, and three soldiers were in the back with the prisoners. In addition the truck was guarded by four motorcyclists. This time the Germans did not call Shulga to take part and he was upset.

"Have I lost their confidence?" he wondered. He paced about the house, not knowing what to do with himself. The day was off to a bad start. Soon Yuri came.

"Headman Shulga, the body of your Uncle Irinarkhi has been found in the ravine."

Late that afternoon, Klaus summoned Shulga.

"The partisans attacked the truck. The guards were killed. Nine men. The arrested were kidnapped. What do you have to say, Headman? And what kind of headman are you, anyway?"

Shulga shook with fear.

"I am talking to you!" the Oberlieutenant shouted.

"But you did not send for me," Shulga blurted out.

"What difference does that make? Someone shot your relative last night. Are you aware of that?"

"Yes."

Klaus paced the room. Suddenly he turned and shouted:

"I will hang you! Do you understand?"

"Yes." Shulga whispered.

"You and your entire family!"

"I know."

"You don't know anything," Klaus said, calmer. "If only you did."

Shulga shuffled his feet.

"Go and arrange for nine graves at the cemetery. Now!" the Oberlieutenant ordered. "I've sent a truck for the bodies. Nine valiant soldiers of the German Army were killed for a bunch of worthless Russians. How unjust!"

XIX

Zoya Andreyevna grew weaker with each passing day. For the last week, Taras and Irina had taken turns sitting with her so that someone was always near. It was as if they were fighting the

illness with her. She had eaten very little the last few days. Her skin had turned yellow, her eyes were sunken and she had changed so drastically that it was hard to recognize her.

Irina could not stand to watch her suffer. She was amazed at the woman's patience and serenity. The previous night had been particularly difficult. Zoya Andreyevna had been tormented by sharp pains in her heart. The pain grew stronger toward morning and she had cried out. Tears had rolled down Taras' and Irina's cheeks, but there was nothing they could do.

At dawn the pain had subsided somewhat, and Zoya Andreyevna relaxed, but she had no strength to talk or even open her eyes. Irina gave her some hot tea. The sick woman sipped several spoonfuls. and opened her eyes.

"Irina, my dear girl," she said quietly, putting her weak hand on Irina's. "You are sharing my grief. You are kind and generous like your mother, God rest her soul. She was always the first to help those in trouble. Dry your tears, my dear. I'm a little better now. I'm very grateful to you. Perhaps Taras will one day repay your kindness. If for some reason he cannot, then may God give you happiness."

There was a knock on the door and Sergei entered with a bundle in his hand.

"Zoya Andreyevna, I brought you some butter. If you can eat a little, you'll feel better in no time."

"Thank you, son. But you children are the best medicine for heart pains."

She was a little merrier. She lifted her head and kissed Sergei on the forehead, but those small movements exhausted her and she again closed her eyes.

That evening Taras brought Sergei and Irina important news.

"I found out the name of Irinarkhi's friend. The one that helped him draw up the list, and the one that Irina photographed."

"What is it?"

"Dormidont."

"Dormidont, Dormidont. I don't know anyone by that name," Sergei said.

"After Irinarkhi's death, he came to see my father. They drank together. It seems Maria knows him."

"We need to tell Martynov," Irina said.

"How can we tell him?" Sergei said thoughtfully. "After the partisans attacked the truck and freed those arrested, Martynov disappeared. I already went by to see him."

"What does his wife say? She has a tiny baby, so she can't leave."

"She says she doesn't know where he is."

"I think it was Martynov who notified the partisans," Irina said.

"Maybe," Sergei said. "It is clear he is an experienced person. Smart and decisive. And very cautious, if his wife doesn't even know."

"How can we find out about this Dormidont?" Irina asked.

"I'll try," Taras said. "I'll find a way to ask my father."

He went home.

"Mama won't eat anything," he said to his father.

"So?"

"Try to get her something tasty."

"Maybe I could ask Dormidont," Shulga thought outloud.

"Yes, ask him."

"But I don't know him very well," Shulga said. "Irinarkhi was good friends with him, but he's dead."

"Where did Uncle Irinarkhi meet him?"

"Apparently, they worked together in Ignatovka."

"In that prisoner-of-war camp?"

"Maybe. What do you want to know for?" Shulga was suddenly on his guard.

"No reason. Just asking."

Shulga was in despair. Klaus and Ebert confided in him less and less. The murder of Irinarkhi and the last partisan attack had thrown him into complete confusion. And those leaflets which had appeared in the village frightened him even more. Maybe the Germans weren't telling the truth about Moscow being taken.

At night he was frightened by every knock, by the squeak of the door, by steps outside. After what happened to Kudimov, he was afraid to depend on or trust anyone. He had trusted Irinarkhi, but he had been killed. He didn't know Dormidont very well. The only person he was glad to see was Yuri. He was dependable and industrious and wasn't afraid of Germans or partisans. The only thing that bothered Shulga about Yuri was he did not drink.

"A healthy young man, and a teetotaler. He won't even touch the stuff. Says it's foul. Says even wine makes him sick."

Then there was more work for him to do. The Nazis decided to search Berezovka again for relatives of Communists whom they had not picked up earlier. This time Klaus and Ebert demanded that Shulga help. He went around the village with the members of the German punitive brigade, continually looking at his list. In three days they managed to find five people.

Klaus was dissatisfied, but further searches proved futile. The five were held in the office building, and it was time to send them away.

"I trust these are on their way to Germany, and not to the partisans in the forest," Ebert said. "What do you say, Headman?"

"Yes sir."

Shulga noticed Yuri on the square and walked over.

"What have you heard about the partisans?"

"I'm not concerned about the partisans," Yuri said. "First let's deal with local saboteurs."

The villagers had been ignoring the German decrees, from working on the roads to turning in warm clothes for soldiers of the German army.

Shulga envied Yuri's calm and self-control.

Time passed, yet the five arrested were still not sent away. Shulga couldnt' figure out why, and his head was full of wild conjectures. Suddenly, he was summoned to Klaus' office. Ebert was there, too.

"The situation has changed," Klaus said, his voice softer than usual. "Now your job is to call together everyone who is able to work. Everyone, do you understand? They are to be sent to Germany. Cripples, old people and children are excluded. How much time do you need?"

"I'll do my best," Shulga promised.

"You have three days," Klaus said harshly. "Bring them to where the other five are being held. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir."

"The Lieutenant's men will help you," Klaus said, indicating Ebert. Actually, he did not like that flabby officer. His endless chatter, omniscient airs and conceit annoyed him. Unfortunately, he had no choice but to work with him. Orders were orders.

XX

Actually, Martynov had not left Berezovka. He had set himself up in a dilapidated, old bathhouse, right under the Germans' noses. Half the bathhouse was still in good condition and could be lived in. His wife brought him food twice a day.

One night Yuri came to see him.

"According to Shulga's son, Dormidont worked with Irinarkhi in that POW camp in Ignatovka. But that's not the main thing. A new person has appeared in the village, a German by the name of Hans. He wears civilian clothes, but more than likely he is an officer. I saw him near the forest with the punitive brigade on two occasions. He hovers around your house, the Esins' and even mine. If you're going to the partisans, be extremely careful."

"I was planning to go tomorrow. Nikolayev is expecting me."

"One more thing. This Hans speaks perfect Russian. No trace of an accent."

"Thanks for warning me."

Martynov decided not to wait until morning and to leave for the forest while it was dark.

At 2:30 a.m. he cautiously descended the bank to the frozen river, and moved toward the woods along the shore. He had tied clumps of hay to his boots so the snow would not crunch. Everything was fine until he climbed the gently sloping bank to the field. Suddenly a rocket flared in front of him.

He threw himself on the ground, lay motionless for a few minutes and then began to crawl on his belly. He had almost reached the forest when another rocket shot up into the air behind him, showering sparks.

Again he froze and waited.

"Don't hurry. Take your time. Stay calm," he repeated to himself.

Finally, he again began to crawl, but immediately heard dogs barking and the crunch of snow nearby. He threw himself forward and fell into a hollow.

The barking grew closer, and Martynov held his breath in order not to give himself away. He saw the reflection of two rockets on the snow, and the quiet was disturbed by German voices somewhere far away. Then silence returned.

Waiting another few minutes, he got up and struck out for the familiar forest road. The worst was over, but he was concerned about something else: the Germans were obviously combing the forest, trying to pick up the trail to the partisan camp. That would complicate communication with the partisans. He told Nikolayev about this when he arrived.

"It makes communication more complicated, but it shouldn't interfere with our activities," Nikolayev said. "Rest here for a while, and then we'll go report to Shakhov."

Shakhov was glad to see him.

"I agree that the Germans are strong," he said. "But we now are in good shape ourselves. We have four hundred partisans, three hundred of whom are soldiers. No matter what it takes, we must save those in the village from Nazi enslavement. How many people are they going to send to Germany?"

"According to our calculations, over fifty," Martynov said.

"Then we need to assign no less than one hundred men to the operation. How far are the houses where Klaus, Ebert and the other officers are staying from the place the prisoners are being held?"

"Klaus' house is about thirty meters away, Ebert's a little further. They're all in one small area."

"What is the guard like?"

"There is one guard at each house round the clock."

"And at the office building?"

"There are four."

"Fine. Then this is what we'll do..." and Shakhov outlined the basic plan. He then turned to Temirov. "Fill us in on the details, Lieutenant."

"We should strike in two places simultaneously," Temirov said, unfolding a map of Berezovka. "One strike will be directed at the column as soon as it reaches the highway. There are boulders along the road and we can make use of them. But that comes later. First we will hit Klaus' and Ebert's houses and the guards on the square. That attack should draw the Germans' attention, and should take place about ten to fifteen minutes before the main one. I will lead the first attack, and Comrade Nikolayev will free those arrested. We will need a third group. We'll call it the escort group. It will be located on the edge of the forest and will cover our retreat. Shakhov will be in charge of that."

"Any comments?" Shakhov asked.

"I have one, as a precaution," Martynov said. "You need to take into consideration that the Germans may alter the date the column is to be sent away. They can also change the route. Yuri and I will check everything at the last minute. Since Yuri is a member of the police, he will be on the square and will give you a signal. If he raises his carbine over his head, that means no change. The first and second groups should not strike before they see the signal clearly from their ambush positions."

"Agreed," Shakhov said.

When Martynov was about to leave, Shakhov shook his hand and said: "God be with you, as they say."

Temirov and Nikolayev organized their groups, each containing thirty men, and went over the upcoming assault in great detail.

The date for sending the village residents away was set for the 3rd of November at 8 a.m. That same day at four, the assault groups were to leave the camp.

The morning was cold, and the trees had been covered with hoarfrost during the night. Occasional smoke from chimneys rose straight in the air.

Before dawn, members of the punitive brigade appeared on the square with dogs, and ten carts pulled by horses drove up. The motorcyclists also gathered.

At ten minutes to eight, Klaus, Ebert, Hans and Shulga arrived. Yuri was also there.

Meanwhile, Temirov's group reached the village, stealthily

going through back gardens, and lay in ambush behind Ebert's house. The partisans watched the Germans leave their houses and walk toward the square. Only the guards were left.

Nikolayev's group went to the highway and hid behind the boulders.

Shakhov's men waited at the edge of the forest.

The Germans led the arrested villagers out on the square to the carts. Yuri raised his carbine over his head, as if weighing it. Temirov and Nikolayev both saw the signal.

Ebert gave orders to the soldiers, and Klaus talked to Shulga. Hans, dressed in a black fur jacket with a lambskin collar and hat, went over to Yuri and offered him a smoke.

Meanwhile the column was forming. The motorcycles positioned themselves in front and back, and the punitive brigade with their dogs at the sides. The dogs barked lazily.

Klaus stepped forward and waved his hand.

The column began to move.

Temirov was itching to attack, but decided to wait just a bit.

The first two motorcycles entered the highway, followed by the carts. When the last cart had reached the road, with three motorcycles trailing behind, Temirov gave the command.

A spray of machine-gun bullets splattered the square where several soldiers and guards were walking. Grenades and incendiary bottles exploded in Ebert's and Klaus' houses.

Initially the column continued to move along the highway, nearing the boulders, but then it stopped. The motorcyclists and members of the punitive brigade looked back, uncertain as to what to do. The dogs howled.

Those arrested began leaping from a cart.

Nikolayev's men stood up from behind the boulders and opened fire on the Germans, keeping them away from those in the carts.

Klaus rushed about the square and Ebert shouted orders. Hans hid behind the porch of the collective farm office building, firing at random.

The building where the German officers billeted was ablaze.

"Retreat!" Temirov ordered, and led his men back. They skirted Berezovka to join Nikolayev's group. For a while the lieutenant could not see what was happening on the highway, but from the shots and shouts he could tell that things were going according to plan.

When his group reached the highway, Nikolayev's men were retreating to the woods, taking the freed villagers with them. Three partisans had remained to unharness the horses. The bodies of about twenty soldiers, three horses and two dogs lay on the

road. Apparently, the Germans who survived had retreated back to the village.

The sun had already risen above the forest and a morning haze hung in the air. Shakhov and his group lay four men who had been wounded on sleds. Then the partisans returned to the forest.

XXI

For two days Klaus and Ebert were beside themselves with fury. They raged at Shulga, Yuri and particularly at Hans.

"Obviously, I was mistaken," Yuri thought. "Hans is not a high-ranking officer, but just an underling. Otherwise, the Germans wouldn't order him about so."

He was right. While Hans watched everyone, including Yuri, and joined the police and gendarmes in searching for signs of partisans near the forest, he also bent over backwards to please Klaus and Ebert. He went about in civilian dress and did not have to stand guard, but the previous day had brought in wood and helped Klaus' aide light the stove. Yuri had seen him drunk on several occasions.

Now Hans was working with Shulga, trying to find the Oberlieutenant a new house. Three times Klaus refused the rooms they had proposed, until the desperate Shulga offered him his own house.

"No", the German officer had said categorically. "Ebert and I will live over there." He pointed to a small, but relatively new house, built shortly before the war, in which none other than Shakhov, the chairman of the collective farm, had lived.

Shulga hurried to get the house in order. Maria and Taras helped.

Shulga suddenly realized he had not seen Dormidont after all the turmoil, and he had not been around on the day it happened.

"He either got scared and ran, or he is hiding," Shulga thought. He decided to look for him as soon as the officers were settled.

"All my papers burned," Klaus complained, consoling with Ebert as a fellow sufferer.

"Mine are safe. I had them with me, as if I knew," Ebert said, not making Klaus feel any better.

"Aren't you fortunate," the Oberlieutenant said gloomily.

Shulga helped the officers move and sent Maria and Taras home. Then he set out. He got as far as the square, when someone called him. He turned. Meyer stood before him.

"I was looking for you, Headman."

Meyer had not been in the village for a while. At least Shulga had not seen him since the investigation ended. Some said he had left with the fighting troops, others were sure he was in the regional center. Now he was back in Berezovka. Perhaps in connection with the events of two days before.

"What can I do for you, Hauptsturmfuehrer Meyer?"

"Come with me."

Once in his former office in the recreation center, the Gestapo officer lay several sheets of paper in front of the headman.

"What is the meaning of these?"

"Glory to the 24th Anniversary of the 1917 Revolution," Shulga read. The flyers were written by hand.

Shulga had completely forgotten that the day after tomorrow was a holiday.

Meyer walked over to him and struck him in the face. Shulga managed to remain standing, but when the Gestapo officer hit him three more times, he fell, grabbing the table as he went down. Meyer kicked him as he lay on the floor.

"Why? What for?" Shulga gasped, spitting blood.

"For everything, you Russian swine!"

Then Meyer left, but Shulga remained lying on the floor, not having the strength to get up. He even lost consciousness. Two soldiers dragged him out. He came to at home. He opened his eyes and felt bandages on his head. His entire body ached. Maria, Taras, and Irina hovered about.

"Am I all right?" he asked.

"Who did this to you?" Maria wailed.

"That's not important," Shulga said. "It's lucky I'm alive."

He felt better the next morning, but troubles come in pairs. He heard footsteps outside and voices and dogs' barking.

"Taras, go see what's going on out there," he asked.

Taras put on his coat and went outside. He was gone a long time. When he returned, Shulga could make out a barely perceptible smile on the boy's face.

"Well, what is it?" he demanded.

Taras stopped grinning.

"There is a flag on the recreation center."

"What kind of flag?"

"A red one, with a hammer and sickle," Taras explained.

"That's all I needed," Shulga cried.

"The Germans are trying to get it down, but they can't. The roof is slippery. There are a lot of soldiers with dogs, and Klaus and Ebert are there. Also someone in a black uniform. I've seen him before, but I don't remember his name."

"That's Meyer," Shulga thought. "Thank God, I'm not there." He almost moaned from pain, helplessness and fury.

He stayed in bed for several days and no one but Yuri came to see him. It was as if the Germans had forgotten he existed. Dormidont also had not appeared.

"I must go see him when I am better," Shulga decided again.

His wounds finally healed and the bandages were removed.

"I'm going for a walk," he told Maria. "I'm well enough now."

He went outside stealthily, and looked around anxiously as he walked. When he reached Irinarkhi's house, where Dormidont was living, Shulga pushed the door and it opened.

"Is anybody here?"

Dormidont was sitting at the table drinking tea, as if nothing had happened.

"Hello," he said, standing up.

"Where have you been? I've looked all over for you," Shulga lied.

"Right here. Where else would I be? I'm not interested in dodging bullets and no one sent for me," Dormidont said. "Sit down and have some tea. Or would you like something stronger? I have some."

"That'll be fine," Shulga said. "I've been through a great deal these last few days."

"I know. I heard what happened. Don't be angry that I didn't come to see you. Sit down."

Dormidont got a bottle of Moscovskaya Vodka, and something to eat from the cupboard.

"I see you still have some of ours," Shulga said, pleasantly surprised. "I have to admit I don't like the foreign stuff. Nothing is better than Russian vodka. Where did you get it?"

"When I was still in Ignatovka. The Germans brought it there from one of our distilleries."

They calmly drank vodka, ate and sipped tea, and not once did Dormidont ask Shulga what was happening in Berezovka. Shulga did not want to talk about it anyway. He'd been through too much the past few days.

"Listen, Gerasim, there was a parade and a session of the government in Moscow, like always, " Dormidont said suddenly.

"That can't be! How do you know?"

"I just know," Dormidont said evasively. "That's how things stand."

Shulga was shocked. "Tell me exactly what you heard," he said after a pause. "All the details."

"There aren't many. There was a parade on Red Square and a meeting the day before. Stalin gave a speech. He also spoke at the parade."

"How will it all end?" Shulga sighed. "What do you think?"

"If the Germans don't win, it will be all over for you and me," Dormidont answered after a pause.

Someone knocked at the door. Dormidont opened it. Taras stood on the porch.

"Father, I have come for you. Sergei is real sick. He probably has pneumonia. Help us get some medicine!"

"Just a minute," Dormidont said. "I've got something that should work." He went to the cupboard and took out some powders and pills.

"Here, take these."

"Oh, thank you," Taras cried. "I have to hurry back. He is really sick."

He did not notice Hans hiding behind the house.

XXII

Sergei was seriously ill. He had been on his way back from a visit to the camp, and had already left the forest and was going along the familiar path. When he had almost reached the village, he had decided to check on what was happening there. He had stepped back and hidden behind a huge fir tree. The cold wind, which had not been so noticeable in the forest, was particularly biting out in the open.

It appeared the Nazis were preparing some kind of punitive operation. There were a lot of soldiers with dogs. The wind was blowing his way and he could hear the soldiers' shouts and the dogs barking. He decided to return home by going around the village along the river.

A lot of snow had fallen and the bank was steep. It was hard to walk, but he had no choice. He might even have to crawl. He could already see his house, when trouble struck. Suddenly the ground gave way under his feet and he almost cried out. He was buried in the snow almost up to his neck. He was about to crawl out when he noticed a Nazi with a sub-machine-gun pacing about near the well. He would have to wait for the right moment. Finally the soldier went into Shulga's house. Sergei crawled out of the snow and raced home.

A few hours later his temperature rose and that night he was delirious. At times he lost consciousness. Irina was in despair until Taras came to help. When he brought the medicine, Irina gave it to her brother immediately, and she felt Sergei was better already.

The folowing day Taras brought him some chicken soup and a piece of chicken.

"Mama sent it. My father got it through Dormidont."

Irina went to heat the soup.

"How do you feel? Any better?"

"Yes, thank you," Sergei smiled.

Someone tapped at the window. Taras went over to the frost-covered pane. "It's Hans", he said to Sergei. He opened the window a crack. "What do you want?"

"Tell Irina I want to see her outside," Hans said, stamping his feet in the cold.

"Irina, someone to see you!" Taras called.

Irina was surprised, and went over to the window.

"Come outside. I need to talk to you," Hans repeated.

"Just a minute," Irina said uncertainly, and went to put on her coat.

"Why does he want to see Irina?" Sergei wondered.

Taras looked out the window.

"I can't see them."

A few minutes passed, when suddenly Sergei sat up.

"Did you hear that? I think it was Irina screaming."

Taras hadn't heard anything, but he grabbed his hat and flew outside. Their tracks led to the bathhouse, and he ran in that direction. Now he could definitely hear Irina's cries coming from there. When Taras flung open the door, he saw Hans pulling off Irina's coat.

"You bastard!" Taras shouted, and raced toward him.

Hans was panting and did not seem to notice anything. Irina was screaming and trying to beat him off.

Taras grabbed a log and hit Hans on the head. He dropped to the floor. Taras picked up the Nazi's gun, threw it over his shoulder, and helped Irina up.

She was pale and shaken.

"What happened?"

"He tried to rape me."

"Let's go. I'll help you," Taras said, and took her arm.

"What will happen now?" Irina asked, looking at Hans in horror. "Did you kill him? Do you know what..."

"If he's dead, he's dead," Taras said angrily.

"Don't talk like that. We can..." Irina stopped. "Look and see, maybe he is still alive."

"We'll figure everything out later, but for now, let's get out of here."

Taras decided to find Yuri. When he came Hans was still unconscious. Yuri poured a bucket of cold water over him, and the

German opened his eyes. Propping him against the wall, Yuri wiped the blood from his face, and held a rag against the wound on his head. Hans shook with fear. He realized that if Yuri reported this to Ebert, he would be sent to the front, at best.

"Make up a bed for him," Yuri said to Taras. "Have you got some vodka?"

"Of course not."

"Too bad. Go find some. I'll get him in the house. Then we'll figure out what to do."

"I'll go see my father," Taras said.

"Fine, but don't tell him anything," Yuri said. "And give back that gun. Now!"

While Taras went in search of vodka, Yuri dragged Hans into the house. The Nazi muttered something, but did not open his eyes.

"He's a heavy devil," Yuri grunted, pulling him across the floor to the bed. Sergei and Irina helped. "Give me a rag and some cold water," he told Irina.

He wet the rag and put it on Hans' head. The German's eyes fluttered, opened, but then shut again.

"Now Irina, calmly tell me exactly what happened," Yuri said. "Especially what he said to you."

"He wanted to talk to me. Said it was important. He asked about Sergei, and then told me he had an assignment from Shakhov. He took me to the bathhouse. He's a spy! Pretended he had been sent by the partisans. I didn't tell him anything. He was drunk. I realized that when he attacked me. He grabbed me and tried to take off my coat. I screamed and Taras..."

"I see," Yuri said. "It seems we are on to something here. So he said he was from Shakhov. Fine. And earlier he mentioned Nikolayev, and sympathised with Fedotov because he had to hide."

Taras brought two bottles of German schnapps.

"I sneaked them from my father. No one saw me. Is it enough?"

"Plenty."

Yuri asked Irina to bring some fresh water.

He repeatedly moistened the cloth on Hans' head, and washed the wound with vodka. Hans opened his eyes.

"Where am I?"

"It's more important whom you're with than where you are," Yuri said. "How do you feel?"

"Awful," Hans admitted. Then he noticed the children. "They're here?"

"They won't bother us", Yuri said. "You have made a terrible blunder."

"What do you mean?"

"You gave yourself away."

"I what?"

"All right. We won't talk about it just yet. Let's drink first," Yuri suggested. "Irina, pour us a drink. Not in those little shot glasses but in real glasses."

Irina brought two glasses, and Taras poured.

"More, more," Yuri said. "After what happened it's no sin to have a good stiff drink."

He handed Hans a full glass.

"Cheers, Hans."

Hans tossed off the liquor. "Whew, I need a chaser!"

Irina handed him a piece of black bread. She offered a piece to Yuri as well, but he refused.

"What did you mean, I gave myself away?" Hans asked.

"You talked about an assignment from Shakhov," Yuri said.

"I said that..."

"I know what you said."

Hans looked at the children and then continued heatedly: "You don't understand. I made that all up in order to expose them, the Esins. I thought they..."

"Let's have another. We'll talk later," Yuri interrupted. "Irina, pour us another drink."

Irina did as she was asked.

"To your health," Yuri said, and clinked his glass against the German's.

Hans frowned, but drank down the alcohol, and did not bother to eat anything. Yuri took a piece of bread.

"I don't want to talk in front of them. Tell them to leave," Hans said.

"Go for a walk," Yuri said smiling. "Sergei, you are still weak. Why don't you go into the other room."

Taras and Irina put on their coats, and Sergei shut the door to the next room.

"Now we are alone," Yuri spoke first. "I trust you appreciate the seriousness of the situation. If Klaus finds out about your conversation with Irina, what will he think? That you are one of Shakhov's agents."

"But I can explain," Hans implored. "I am a soldier of the Reich!"

"You don't mean to tell me there are no anti-fascists in Germany? Or in the German Army?" Yuri said. "How can you be sure?"

"There probably are..."

"Then how can you prove you aren't an agent. You who tried to rape a young girl. I'm sure neither Klaus nor Ebert gave you that kind of an assignment. You yourself are a German and know

that Germans are very disciplined. Let us proceed from the assumption that you are actually one of Shakhov's agents..."

"Do you believe that?" Hans interrupted. "How..."

"Let's say I don't, but I have my doubts," Yuri said. "You could be an agent. Those partisans are clever!"

"That's ridiculous!"

"No, it is not ridiculous, but a real possibility. Klaus and Ebert are so infuriated by the partisans' activities that they'll sooner believe you are an agent than an amateur detective."

"What a damned fool I am," Hans said gloomily.

"You're being too hard on yourself," Yuri said smiling. "I am your friend and can prove it."

"What do you mean?"

"It is simple. First, no one knows what happened. I'll see to it that the girl keep quiet. And if the need arises, you'll help me."

Yuri looked at Hans. The German obviously understood what was up, but was having trouble taking it all in.

"What do I have to do?" he asked meekly.

"Nothing, for now," Yuri said. "But anything can happen, and I too may end up in trouble. Then I'll need your help. I don't know about you, but it seems to me that Klaus and Ebert are too rash. They can make mistakes."

"That worries me, too."

"How about another drink?" Yuri suggested.

All right."

Yuri poured Hans half a glass.

"Fill it up," Hans said. "My head is pounding."

He drank. Yuri picked up the bread, broke it in half, and handed a piece to Hans.

"So we have a deal?"

"I only ask that you not turn me in," Hans said.

"I won't, I promise," Yuri said. "Can you stand up? I'll take you home."

XXIII

In the middle of November a notice appeared in Durasovo, Berezovka, Ignatovka and other villages in the area. It read:

"Travel on all roads, both major highways and country roads, is forbidden for men between the ages of seventeen and fifty.

"Persons found on these roads will be detained and sent to camps. Persons on whom weapons are discovered will be shot as partisans.

"Persons aiding the partisans in any form: either providing them with food, or hiding them, or giving them shelter, will be considered partisans themselves.

"All persons having information of plans against the army and the military government; of acts of sabotage or the planning of such; of the appearance of partisans, both individuals and groups, or of parachutists, who do not report this to the nearest German military unit, will be sentenced to death and their property destroyed."

On November 13, Hitler summoned his army groups' commanders to Orsha. He ordered them to begin a new offensive on Moscow and categorically rejected the suggestion of several high-placed officers of the General Staff to allow the German troops outside of Moscow to engage in defensive operations until the spring of 1942. He was supported by Brauhich who commanded the land forces, Galder, the chief of the General Staff, and Bock, who commanded the Army Group Center.

Hitler announced that Moscow must be encircled so that not one Russian soldier, not one resident, whether man, woman or child, could escape. The Fuehrer further announced that the necessary preparations had been made to flood the city and its environs with water, using special equipment. An enormous lake would appear, forever covering the Soveit capital. Hitler became more and more excited, but then calmed down and made a different decision: leave an opening in the encirclement so those surrounded could leave for the east, thus avoiding the necessity of feeding millions of people once the city was taken. Hitler issued a directive to encircle the Russian capital with a dense ring of troops along the circular railroad line. According to his orders, not one German soldier was to cross that line until given the order to take the empty town.

Two German armies, consisting of thirteen armored divisions, were assigned to the offensive northwest of Moscow on the Volokolamsk-Klin and Istra-Solnechnogorsk lines. An army of nine armored divisions was to handle the Tula-Kashira line southwest of the city. The mobile forces of the Army Group Center were covered, from the north and south, by two specially chosen armies. The frontal offensive on the main Soviet forces of the Western Front was assigned to the 4th Army.

The Germans transferred several armored divisions to Moscow from other lines and reinforced their corps with additional tanks and aviation.

Kolesov learned about all of this, and immediately reported it to the partisans.

In the partisan detachment it was decided to carry out several

major operations against the Germans during their new general offensive on Moscow.

Shakhov also had something to report to Kolesov:

"Do you remember the children from Berezovka told us about Dormidont, a friend of the headman and Irinarkhi, who was executed? We have found out that he is not Dormidont, but Dietrich, Gustav Dietrich. He is of German descent, though born here. Before the revolution his father had large estates in Lithuania, along the Volga, and outside of Tashkent on the Chirchik River. Dietrich was arrested as a political offender, but escaped and in 1940 was in the German-occupied part of Poland. He came here with the German army. The Germans wanted him to go underground and become an informer in the POW camp at Ignatovka. But the prisoners exposed him, and some of them even managed to escape. By the way, three of them are with us. Dietrich and his friend Irinarkhi settled in Berezovka. We propose to execute him."

"I go along with the proposal", Kolesov said. "And you are right in planning one of your operations in Ignatovka. Though the village is far from here, it is of vital importance to attack the POW camp."

XXIV

That night was a difficult one.

Taras, Sergei and Irina stayed with Zoya Andreyevna till morning. She was pale and emaciated, weak as the flame of the candle dimly burning on the table.

Shulga and Maria slept in the next room, but they too slept fitfully. Several times during the night Shulga opened the door to ask how his wife was. The children shrugged their shoulders.

Zoya Andreyevna did not sleep, but lay with her eyes closed, silent except for frequent coughing spells.

Towards morning, when it was first beginning to get light, she opened her eyes.

"Taras, go get Marfa. You know, the woman whose house is near the slope to the river."

"Why?"

"I need her, son."

In a half hour Taras was back with Marfa.

"Sit down, Marfa, and listen carefully," Zoya Andreyevna said, almost inaudibly. "As soon as I am dead, you wash and dress me according to custom. We don't have a clergyman in the village,

so you read the prayer yourself. Ask your husband to make a coffin. I can't depend on Gerasim, you understand. My children will help."

Taras cried quietly. Sergei and Irina sat motionless.

"Don't grieve," Zoya Andreyevna said, looking at them tenderly. "You have your whole lives ahead of you. I've finally reached the end of my sufferings, thank God."

She passed away at 8:30 a.m.

When Taras told his father the terrible news, Shulga said nothing to his son. He entered his wife's room, stood at the head of the bed for a moment looking at her, and then left, scowling. "Cruel," Taras thought. "Traitor," Sergei said to himself. Irina watched him go, her eyes full of hatred and indignation.

Maria was planning to go to Durasovo, and the death of Zoya Andreyevna did not alter her plans.

"Don't go, Maria," Shulga begged. "Please don't go."

"You know full well that I have to. I promised," Maria said, remaining firm. She harnessed the horse and left.

They took the coffin to the cemetery on a sled. At that time Shulga was rushing about the village organizing a field hospital: a convoy of wounded Germans had arrived in Berezovka and he had no time to worry about the funeral. Everyone who did attend silently cursed him.

The cemetery was old and badly kept up. There were a few grave stones, and the rest were crosses, mostly wooden, crooked and rotting, some painted, others plane. Several were of rusty metal. There was an occasional fence enclosing a grave, many sunken graves, and the paths were covered with snow. Since the war about twenty new graves had appeared, all on the slope at the edge of the cemetery. Sergei and Irina's mother's grave was also there. About fifty meters to one side there was a new German cemetery with straight rows of identical mounds and rough, birch crosses.

The small procession entered the cemetery.

"Do you remember Schneider?" Yuri whispered to Sergei.

"Of course."

"He was killed yesterday. To be more exact, died of his wounds."

"That's good news," Sergei said, pleased.

A light snow fell. It landed on Zoya Andreyevna's waxy face but did not melt. She lay in the coffin unnaturally small and withered. Taras sat next to the coffin on the sled and did not take his eyes off his mother's face.

Sergei was surprised to see Martynov at the cemetery near the newly dug grave. "Why is he here?" he thought in fright. "It is dangerous."

But Martynov calmly helped lift the coffin from the sled, and kissed Taras.

"Don't grieve, son. It's the war."

Yuri talked quietly to Martynov, and Irina caught snatches of their conversation:

"... you are the only police representative here. The Germans aren't thinking about us. Don't worry, everything will be fine."

Marfa quietly said a muffled prayer.

Taras, Irina and Sergei kissed Zoya Andreyevna's cold forehead, and Marfa's husband closed the coffin. They lowered it into the grave, covered it with earth, and then lay fir branches on the mound.

"We'll walk back with you," Irina said to Taras, and the three children left.

Martynov disappeared.

Yuri caught up with the children.

"We should get together and drink to her memory, as is the custom," he said, and showed them a bottle in his pocket.

"Only not at home," Taras said firmly.

"Let's go to our house," Irina said.

The four of them went to the Esins'.

When Taras returned home, his father was there.

"Couldn't make it to the funeral, I was busy," he tried to explain. "We should have a funeral dinner. What do you think?"

"We already had one," Taras said. "Don't trouble yourself."

Now Taras despised his father even more than before. Yuri had just told them about the situation at the front.

It seemed the Germans had begun their offensive in November 15-16. Two of their armored groups had attacked the right flank of the Soviet Western Front, and two days later an army of armored divisions began an offensive southeast of Tula. The Germans were pushing through to Moscow on the Klin and Volokolamsk lines. Soviet General Headquarters had reinforced the Red Army units along the Moskva-Volga Canal and outside of Yakhroma, Zvenigorod, Serpukhov and Tula. The Soviet troops were successfully beating off the enemy attacks, causing huge losses in men and equipment. The German advance was stopped thirty-five to forty kilometers outside of Moscow. There was an order: the defeat of the enemy will begin outside of Moscow.

Yuri had learned all of this from Martynov.

XXV

Boboyor Amanov never imagined that such a thing might happen to him.

He was drafted during the very first days of the war, and had retreated with his battalion from the western border to central Russia, not far from Moscow. Though he had gone through heavy fighting with his favorite commander, Captain Esin, he not only had survived, but had not even been wounded.

Then, soon after he had been to Berezovka where he had given Esin's letter to his children, there had been a terrible battle with a column of German tanks. The battle raged throughout the day and night, and continued the next day. Their battalion lost many men, but they held firm. The Germans moved in reinforcements, sparing nothing in order to break the defense and move forward, but their attacks were repulsed. In the heat of the battle Amanov heard the assured command of the captain: "Not one step back!"

They were also waiting for reinforcements and had another hour or two to hold out.

It was at this point it had happened.

Amanov had heard a terrible whine. Suddenly everything went black and he felt an excruciating pain in his temples. When he came to, deaf, with a concussion, he was being dragged to his feet by Germans who then led him somewhere.

There had been a forest clearing surrounded by barbed wire, a station, a train, another station named Durasovo, and a long walk to a prisoner-of-war camp.

The camp consisted of six wooden barracks surrounded by a sturdy wall with barbed wire along the top and watch towers where guards were on duty day and night.

Fortunately there was a doctor among the prisoners, who treated Boboyor. In a month, the young man was sent to dig peat with the others.

They worked from eight in the morning to eight in the evening, and their arms and legs barely moved from fatigue. But the Germans forced them to work: they set dogs on them, beat them, threw them in punishment cells, and shot many who were too weak to work.

Amanov heard there was an underground organization in the camp which was preparing an escape, but he could not find a way to contact it. Then he learned that two organized and well-planned escapes by the group had ended tragically. The runaways had been caught and hanged before the residents of Ignatovka, the nearest village.

Only the third attempt was successful.

There was a rumor in the camp that all those who had escaped were safe, and several had joined the partisans and were fighting the Germans.

Boboyor wasted away, tormented by his own thoughts. How could he have surrendered to the enemy? Why had he not shot himself instead?

"If I survive, how can I face my friends and relatives?" he thought. "But then, no one survives here."

The early, rainy autumn and the severe winter frosts made the prisoners' lives unbearable. The barracks were practically unheated, their clothes worn, and even what they had was not for winter. Men began to come down with severe colds, pneumonia, and pleurisy which daily took many prisoners' lives.

Amanov was sure he would fall ill since he was from the south, but he hung on until the end of November. He was actually glad when he got sick.

"Doctor, please don't try to save me. Why bother? I don't want to live."

But the doctor gave him herbs and miraculously procured moonshine, and managed to get Boboyor transferred to the hospital. The Germans had finally organized one in the camp. There the food was slightly better, though the slop was still slop, just a little thicker. But Russian women worked there as nurses, and brought food for their charges on the sly.

Boboyor came back to life and it was those women who filled him with faith and hope. One of them had whispered to him:

"Don't lose heart. Soon the Germans will be defeated. They are getting a real beating outside of Moscow."

November was drawing to a close when one morning at dawn, those in the hospital barracks heard random shooting outside and the dogs barking furiously. Suddenly armed men in civilian dress burst in.

"Hello, friends. Get up and come with us."

A young, olive-skinned lieutenant, the only one in military uniform, looked at Amanov in surprise.

"Are you from Central Asia too?"

Boboyor was taken aback, and a lump rose in his throat. He leaped from the bed and embraced the lieutenant.

"Can you walk?" the officer asked.

"Yes," Amanov answered.

"Then follow me."

He ran after the lieutenant across the frozen yard to the gates, repeating constantly:

"I am from Central Asia! I'm Uzbek, do you understand?"

"Small world," the lieutenant said on the run. "We're fellow countrymen. I'm Uzbek too. From Tashkent."

Bodies of German soldires lay about the yard. Armed men in civilian clothes and the freed prisoners raced for the wide open gates. The watch-towers above the camp were empty.

XXVI

The winter was fierce. Berezovka was buried in snow up to the roof-tops, and many sheds and collective farm buildings collapsed under its weight. Blizzards and snowstorms raged continually.

One such cold winter night, during a strong blizzard, Taras sat in the back room with his mother's photograph in front of him. He thought bitterly of the humiliation she had suffered, of her terrible illness, of his father's disgraceful return and of all the wrong he had done his mother. He went over all that in his mind, and his hatred for his father flared up. As he was thinking those bitter, gloomy thoughts he heard his father's voice from the other room calling him. He got up slowly.

"Bring us some hot tea," his father ordered. He was drinking with Dormidont.

Shulga was not blessed with powers of observation, and he was often the last to know, but lately he had begun to size up Dormidont. He didn't know that Dormidont was a German, and in general knew very little about him; the latter did not confide in the headman. But Dormidont seemed to like him. In any case, he treated him better than Klaus, Ebert, Meyer or Hans did. Perhaps only Yuri, the policeman, sympathized with Shulga more, but he was different. He was too independent, and did not cringe before the Germans, though they trusted him.

Dormidont was something else.

Shulga began to notice that Dormidont met with the Germans, he had long talks with them and they treated him with respect. Shulga even began to suspect that the Germans wanted to get rid of him and name Dormidont headman. But he forced out that thought. Dormidont was open with him, and was genuinely glad to see him. He was always generous when Shulga came to see him, and visited the headman frequently.

"I have to get in even better with Dormidont," Shulga thought. "He is on good terms with Klaus, and maybe he will put in a good word for me." So Shulga went to see Dormidont more often, and after his wife's death, began to invite him home regularly.

That day they were having a particularly good time.

There was a blizzard raging, and it was freezing cold, but it was warm and cosy inside and they had plenty to eat and drink. In the last few days Shulga had successfully managed to stock supplies, and Dormidont had not come empty-handed. He had brought Russian vodka, cold fried pork, sausage, cheese and biscuits.

"I tell you, Gerasim, I'm itching to get my hands on Shakhov and those with him. It's people like him who ruined my life, and not just mine, but my father's too."

"What did your father do?"

"He was a landowner, with large estates in Russia, Lithuania and Uzbekistan."

When Taras brought in the tea, Shulga and Dormidont were already drunk and loudly expounding their views on life to one another. Taras listened to their conversation from behind the door.

"The Soviet government ruined me completely," Dormidont said. "I hate it. If it fell, I could get back all that was taken from my father. I'd be set for life!"

"I hate the Communists too," Shulga said. "They destroyed my father and wrecked my life. I didn't have a lot of money, but I had something. Do you think the Germans will return it all to us if they win?"

"They should. That's why we are working for them," Dormidont said frankly. "By the way, you should get closer to your son. You can find out a lot from him about his friends. Pay attention to the Esins. Check to see if they're connected with the partisans."

"You think they are?"

"I'm sure of it. I've noticed some things, but they are careful around me. They come to your house and are friends with Taras, so you have the perfect opportunity. Listen, you and I have been entrusted with a great responsibility, and we must prove ourselves worthy. It is our duty to the German command. The Germans are strong, Gerasim. There are partisans, but the Soviet government hides in the forest while the Germans are out front for the whole world to see. You have to understand that."

They had a drink, and Dormidont continued:

"Get closer to Taras so he'll tell you what the Esins talk about, who they meet, what they think about the future. That way, maybe we can get to the bottom of this partisan business."

"What you say makes sense," Shulga agreed.

"At least we'll live as we are supposed to in our old age", Dormidont said dreamily. "Get back all that the Bolsheviks took, with interest for those twenty-four years. And I'll have the satisfaction of serving my native land, Great Germany."

Shulga immediately pricked up his ears. Had he heard right? Did Dormidont call Germany his native land?

But Dormidont did not say anymore about it. He changed the subject.

"Now the new general offensive on Moscow has begun. I hope that this will be the end of the Bolsheviks."

"I hope so too," Shulga agreed. "Let's have one more."

They sat talking and drinking until late that night.

After Shulga saw Dormidont off, he remembered his suggestion and went to see Maria who, after Zoya Andreyevna's death, had moved into her room.

"Be nice to Taras. We may be able to get something important out of him."

Then he went to talk to his son.

"How are things, Taras?"

"O.K."

"I keep meaning to ask you what you know about your grandfather?"

"Grandfather?" Taras was surprised. "I don't know anything about him. Was he in prison too?"

"I'm not talking about that. Your grandfather was a good man. But the Bolsheviks shot him."

"That means he deserved it," Taras said with certainty.

"The thing is, he didn't!" Shulga said. He realized the conversation with Taras was not going well. His son was distant and it was not going to be easy to convince him that the Soviet government was not to be trusted. After such an unsuccessful beginning, how could he change the subject to the Esins? Another time.

"Well, run along, son," Shulga said gently. "We'll talk later."

Taras went to his room and glanced at his mother's photograph. It was the last one of her. The one of him, Irina and his mother.

While she was alive, Taras had not been particularly close to her. He had been ashamed to express his feelings. Now she was gone, he realized how much he needed her.

"You died and left me alone," he thought. "My father, a traitor, is alive and well. Is that fair? No matter what anybody says, I'm the son of a traitor. I eat his food and live in the same house, and don't fight him. Some Young Pioneer! So what if I help our side, that's not enough. I should do more for people and for the country."

Mama looked gravely at him from the picture.

"You are right, Taras," he seemed to hear her say. "But you are strong and can overcome these troubles. Just trust your heart and your friends, and love your country. You know what kind

of man your father is, and must choose a different path. Good luck, my dear."

Suddenly he heard the sound of planes. "Is it the Germans again? More bombing."

But then he heard German anti-aircraft guns.

"That means they're ours!" He wanted to shout with joy.

Anti-aircraft guns opened fire, but the Soviet bombers calmly flew to the east.

In another few minutes Taras heard muffled explosions and saw flashes above the earth. Apparently the planes had bombed the German trains on the railroad track.

"Great!" Taras thought as he fell asleep. "Our soldiers are stronger than the Germans. A thousand times stronger. And they'll win. Like Martynov said, the defeat of the enemy must begin outside of Moscow.

XXVII

"What kind of man am I?" Shulga thought. He had never considered that question before and now he had to. His thoughts were tangled. "I hate Esin, that's for certain. And there is a good reason. But what about his kids? Why did I feel sorry for them? Especially Sergei? Kudimov warned me and I didn't listen. Irinarkhi told me and I didn't believe him either. Why? Because they help me? No, not only because of that. Now Kudimov and Irinarkhi are dead. Dormidont is telling me the same thing and I believe him. But why? Maybe he is really German and not Russian. If he's German he has his own interests. But despite everything, I'm Russian, even though I hate the Communists and the Soviet government, and those damned partisans. They're the source of all the trouble. But who are those partisans? True, a lot of them are from the regional committee and are active Communists. The Party ordered them to fight. But what about Martynov? He's a driver and not a Party member. He used to be a calm, quiet fellow and now they say he's practically the main partisan spy. He's disappeared and no one can find him. Dormidont is looking for him, though he didn't mention it to me. For some reason Klaus didn't ask me to join in the search. Maybe he doesn't trust me. And those leaflets in the village. And the flag on the recreation center on November 7th. Why did Meyer beat me? Don't I serve the Germans as headman? And everything is a mess at home. Zoya died, thank God. She was nothing compared to Maria. Maria waited for me while I was in prison, and understands me, though she

doesn't know all my thoughts and problems. And she doesn't ask, as if she doesn't care. I need to be gentle with Taras but he's so aloof. And he's my own son."

The more Shulga thought, the more confused he became. And he did not have an answer to one of the questions that nagged at him.

He went outside. Printed notices hung all over the village. He walked over and read one.

"Anyone knowing the whereabouts of the dangerous criminal Z. K. Martynov, is ordered to notify the German Command.

"A large reward is offered for information."

They had left him out again! Martynov probably appeared in Berezovka, otherwise they wouldn't be looking for him there. It would be perfect if Shulga could find him. That way he'd show the Germans his worth, and receive a reward.

Shulga walked around the village, and feeling chilled, went back home.

"Taras, you know Martynov, don't you?" he asked.

"Who's that?"

"He was the driver for the collective farm, and lives in the village."

"Heard of him."

"From Sergei?"

"No, from somebody else."

"What about Sergei?"

"What do you mean?"

"What does he think? What does he talk about?"

"Same as others."

"What in particular?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Does he talk about the partisans?" Shulga asked, deciding to be more direct.

"Everybody talks about the partisans, but I haven't discussed them with Sergei."

"What about with Irina?"

"She's a girl!"

No, he would definitely never get anything out of Taras.

An hour later Taras was at the Esins'.

"Sergei, you need to be more careful."

"What happened?"

"My father was asking questions about you. And Dormidont is snooping around."

"I know about Dormidont. Tell me what your father said."

Taras related their conversation.

"Good for you, Taras," Sergei said.

"Sergei, do you remember you warned us never to do anything on our own, without you, and we promised we wouldn't," Irina interrupted.

"I remember," Sergei said.

"Tell him about your oath, Taras," Irina said.

Taras lifted his head, met Sergei's eyes, and looked away. There was an uneasy silence. Irina, sitting in a chair, lost patience and leaping to her feet, began:

"Taras swore to kill his father, set fire to his house, and then commit suicide. He made the oath in memory of his mother."

"Is that true, Taras?" Sergei asked, his eyes open wide.

"Yes."

"The question of murdering your father and burning your house can only be decided by the partisan detachment. Killing yourself is an act of cowardice, and cowardice is to be despised. Remember that once and for all."

"Isn't it better to die than to be the son of such a despicable man?"

"No. You have a duty to your country. Your father has betrayed it, but you have been called to fight for your country's freedom."

Sergei walked over to Taras and hugged him.

"Do you remember the red flag on the recreation center?" he asked.

"Sure."

"And the leaflets."

"Of course."

"Now I can tell you that we did all that. And I advise you to stop moping. We must fight. It will be difficult, but we'll win, you'll see. And I am sure you will be with us. You have already done a lot, but you can do even more. Are you willing?"

"Of course I am!" Taras said.

XXVII

After the frightening conversation with Yuri at the Esins, and the threat of his being suspected of having ties with the partisans, Hans asked Klaus to be sent to the hospital in Durasovo to keep trouble at bay, so to speak.

He concocted a story to explain his wound to the Oberlieutenant.

"It happened in the forest. A freak accident. I search the forest every day for partisans, as you commanded. That particular day I was there as usual. The snow was deep. Suddenly a tree began

to fall. The wind must have blown it over. I didn't have time to jump aside, and this is the result. I feel terrible."

Klaus believed Hans, and sent him to the regional center in his own car.

Hans returned two weeks later, rested and calm. He immediately reported to Klaus.

"I have important information, Oberlieutenant. First, greetings from Hauptsturmfuehrer Meyer. He can't make it to Berezovka due to an important investigation in Durasovo. On November 29, there was a major attack on the railroad junction. An entire train with new tanks was derailed, the guard killed, and a train with fuel destroyed. Meyer suspects the Russian railroad workers. He's been interrogating them for several days."

"What important information do you have?" Klaus asked.

"Actually, it is more observation and thought. It concerns the partisans. I have considered all the information available, and have come to the conclusion that the partisan scouts come to Sergei Esin's house daily. That is their secret address."

"Daily?"

"Precisely," Hans said. "Martynov and all the others show up there. We must intensify the watch on that house."

"Perhaps you are right," Klaus said thinking. "I'll summon Lieutenant Ebert and the headman."

When Ebert and Shulga arrived, Klaus had already dismissed Hans.

"Gentlemen, we need to intensify the watch on the Esin house. To be more exact, on Sergei Esin. There is information..." and he proceeded to explain what he had learned.

Sergei and Irina noticed the changes that very evening: two policemen and a German soldier paced back and forth a short distance from their house. Later, Dormidont and Shulga appeared. They walked separately, as if going about their own business.

"Now we can't even leave the house," Sergei said gloomily.

The next day Yuri was among those on watch; Sergei went to the well for water, and bumped into him as if by accident.

"What does all this mean?"

"Don't pay any attention," Yuri whispered happily. "The important news is the Germans were defeated outside of Moscow. I'll fill you in on the details later. Big things will be happening in the next few days. In just a few more days!"

Sergei returned home excited and happy.

"Irina, I have an idea. Let's celebrate your birthday."

"But it's not..."

"What difference does it make? We'll say it's tomorrow. Let's invite Taras and his father. The Germans were defeated outside

of Moscow! We'll celebrate as if it was your birthday."

"That's great!" Irina agreed.

Sergei went to see Marfa's husband to ask for two bottles of moonshine. Irina got their supplies out of the cellar.

"Not much," Sergei said. "I'll go see Taras. He'll get something from his father, and I'll invite the two of them to come tomorrow at seven."

The next evening everything was ready. Taras came alone.

"I think my father is afraid," he explained.

"That's all right. In fact, it's even better. We can speak openly." Sergei winked at Taras. "Do you know what we are celebrating? The defeat of the Nazis outside of Moscow!"

"You're kidding!"

"No, it's true!"

That evening Shulga did not pass their house. Dormidont appeared twice, and two policemen and a soldier paced some distance away.

"It's fine to celebrate, but I'm for doing something productive", Sergei said. "Let's write at least ten leaflets. They should say something like this: 'The enemy has been defeated outside of Moscow! Let us swear to fight for the glory, happiness, freedom and independence of our country until victory is ours. We will take revenge on the Nazis for the destruction of our cities and villages, and for the blood our people have shed. We promise the soldiers of the Red Army to concentrate all our energies on achieving victory over the enemy. Blood for blood! Death for death! An end to the Nazi invaders. An end to war forever!' What do you think?"

"Good", Irina and Taras said in unison.

They drew the curtains, moved farther away from the windows. Sergei got paper, ink and pencils.

Meanwhile, the partisans were preparing to attack Berezovka. Everything had been thought out to the smallest detail. Three groups of one hundred fifty men under the command of Shakhov, Nikolayev and Temirov would enter the village at dawn on December 10.

The night before, no one in the camp slept. Nikolayev's and Temirov's groups were to set out first. The men dressed in enemy uniforms. Only the commanders remained in their own clothes.

Temirov's group skirted the village from the west and was the first to appear on the square near the recreation center.

"Who goes there?" the guard asked in German.

"Your own," Temirov said in Russian, and a partisan in a police uniform stepped forward.

Seeing the familiar uniform, the guard let them pass.

Nikolayev's group entered the village from the east. They had no trouble either.

Shakhov and his men waited.

Then Temirov fired a flare—the signal to attack.

The Germans were caught completely off guard. Klaus ran outside in his underwear. Ebert was captured in bed. The partisans were already leading Shulga and Dormidont down the street. Shulga noticed Yuri among the partisans.

"Yuri, you're not with us?" he asked.

"No, I'm not with you," Yuri said, and smiled.

The village residents helped the partisans find hidden Germans. Hans raced from his house and down the main street, but Yuri caught up with him.

"You really are a stupid fellow. I told you to stick close to me, and you run away," Yuri said.

"You're with them?" Hans said maliciously. "Traitor!"

"We'll see who betrayed whom," Yuri said calmly. "Let's go."

Sergei and Irina were outside as soon as things started.

The sun came up and the day promised to be cloudless and sunny, though rather windy.

"I think we met," one of the partisans said, stopping the children. He was tall and dark-skinned, with slightly slanting eyes.

"Amanov? Boboyor? It can't be!" Sergei couldn't believe his eyes.

Ivan Ivanovich ran over.

"You see, my adopted son is fighting beside me."

"I'll tell you everything that happened later," Boboyor promised. "We'll meet again."

Red flags already fluttered above the recreation center and the collective farm offices. One had been made by the partisans, the other by Sergei and Irina.

Klaus, Ebert and Hans stood on one side of the square with the German soldiers who had survived after the skirmish. Shulga and Dormidont were on the other. Shakhov walked by and Shulga recognized him. Shakhov stopped.

"Why are we being held separately?" Shulga asked, pointing to the Germans.

"Because they are prisoners of war and you are traitors," Shakhov said. "You are to be shot."

There were not many residents left in Berezovka, but all who remained gathered on the square.

Nikolayev came out onto the porch of the recreation center.

"My friends! At the end of November and the beginning of December the Red Army defeated the enemy outside of Moscow.

"Our troops, now on the offensive, have pushed the enemy from

the gates of the capital and have liberated over four hundred villages and towns. In those battles the Nazis lost 55,000 men, and over 100,000 wounded and frost-bitten. They lost 777 tanks, 297 guns and mortars, and a great deal of equipment. I congratulate you on a great victory. Without it, our partisan victory in liberating Berezovka would have been impossible. You all remember Stalin's July 3rd speech when he said: 'It is necessary to organize partisan detachments, both infantry and cavalry, in the areas occupied by the enemy, attack enemy units, destroy trains and roads, cut telephone and telegraph wires, and burn forests, warehouses and supply trains. In these occupied areas we must create intolerable conditions for the enemy and all his accomplices, follow and destroy him at every step, and thus disrupt his plans.' We will carry out these instructions from the Party. Thank you for your help and support."

"Death to the traitors!" someone shouted from the crowd.

Nikolayev raised his arm to calm the villagers.

"More good news," he continued. "Our friend and neighbor, Major Esin, was awarded the Order of the Red Banner for valiant leadership in an important military operation in..."

He did not manage to finish what he was saying.

Shulga, who was standing quietly and even timidly, suddenly pulled a knife from out of his boot and struck Shakhov in the chest. Yuri kicked the headman and the knife fell from his hand.

The crowd gasped.

The partisans silently bowed their heads over Shakhov's body. Ivan Ivanovich knelt down and closed the commander's eyes. The villagers stood motionless in shock and sorrow.

A cold December wind blew. A wind of struggle, a wind of hope.

REQUEST TO READERS

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